

## **Trouble at the Bazaar**

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A riot at Bishkek's main market highlights traders' concerns over widespread corruption in the country's bazaars

In early November, Kyrgyzstan's largest market, the Dordoi in Bishkek, ground to a halt as irate Kyrgyz traders threatened to mob the stalls of rival Chinese entrepreneurs.

Hundreds of police were called to the scene and a riot was averted only after local government officials promised to address the Kyrgyz traders' grievances.

The protests broke out after a market operator surreptitiously requisitioned storage crates on behalf of Chinese traders eager to get their illegally imported goods to their market stalls.

The Chinese traders offered to pay over the odds for the boxes, so on the night of November 4 they were secretly shifted around. One Kyrgyz trader, Aigul, lost all her crockery stock, worth around \$1,000.

There is deep resentment of Chinese stallholders. Many are in the country illegally and the bulk of the goods they sell are smuggled, which allows them to undercut their Kyrgyz counterparts.

The Kyrgyz customs inspectorate warehouse is currently home to 59 crates of socks decorated with the forged logo of the Kyrgyz AO Baipak company. Another four crates are held at the Chuisk district tax office warehouse. The goods were imported illegally from China.

But tax officer Yerkin Kydyraliev says this sock mountain is the tip of the iceberg. Many more shipments have eluded tax and customs officials.

The fracas exposed the level of corruption enveloping the world of the Kyrgyz bazaar.

Over half the population relies on small-scale trading at the country's numerous ramshackle markets. In Bishkek alone there are over 80 bazaars and markets.

Mass unemployment and paltry wages - teachers and doctors earn around \$10 a month - drive people to the bazaars. Many stallholders are highly educated professionals, some are pensioners, and some are peasants which came to town to sell small surplus crops.

But the markets themselves are owned and operated by top-level bureaucrats and politicians, who make a tidy living from the enterprises.

The Dordoi market is made up of five smaller markets. One, the Oberon market, is owned by Nurjamal Baibolova, the wife of ex-secret service officer and parliamentary deputy Kubat Baibolov. The local traders believe it was she who organised the containers for the Chinese traders.

Askar Salymbekov, governor of the Narynsk region, owns two of the markets. Abdrasul Kulbaev, brother of Bishkek's deputy mayor, owns another, while the fifth belongs to Raikan Alkanov, a former chief of the Kyrgyz consumer union.

The owners pay scant attention to conditions at their markets. Traders pay 40-50 som (\$1) per day to rent 40 cms of bench space in the markets. The owners also rent out containers to stallholders to store and transport their goods. But sanitation is poor, the stalls and lanes dirty and unkempt. Traders are also vulnerable to corrupt tax officials, police officers and thieves.

Indeed traders at the Dordoi claim the local police department, GOM 18, is the principal criminal organisation operating at the market. The traders believe the police know the identities of all the thieves working the markets and collude closely in their activities.

"When I first set up shop here police officers would come around every day demanding money for their 'lunch'," said stallholder Guljan K. "Then some lads, long-standing traders, came around, saying they would 'set things straight' with the police. But you can't work here without the backing of the police."

Being a police officer on the market beat can be lucrative. But as Janybek, a sergeant with the Dordoi force, points out, his officers are often left with little option but to take kickbacks.

"We don't get paid our wages of 600 som (\$12) for months on end," Janybek complained. "I've got three kids and an apartment to pay for. I've got to pay for my kids schooling, feed them, dress them, and pay my dues to my superiors."

Janybek came to the capital from a regional police department. "I wasn't brought here for free you know. There's a price on every job here. And I'm still paying back the money I borrowed to get this job."

Theft of traders' goods is a regular occurrence and although the police generally manage to return stolen goods within 24 hours, most stallholders only get back half of what's gone missing.

In October, Burul K had \$500 worth of goods stolen from her storage room. When she reported the theft to the police, officers appeared the following day with half her belongings, which they claimed had been found lying around the police station.

The bazaars sully the towns and villages of Kyrgyzstan. But they mustn't be closed as they provide perhaps the only means of support for thousands.

Almaz Usubaliev, chairman of the National Committee on the Struggle Against Poverty, believes more markets need to be opened, but conditions for traders need to be radically improved.

After the November 4 fracas it seems the Kyrgyz authorities have recognised the need to pay closer attention to the country's proliferating small markets. After all, it is an Eastern tradition for mass discontent to begin in the bazaar.

Yrysbek Omurzakov is a regular IWPR contributor.

**Location:** [China](#)

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