

Akaev Provokes Constitutional Reform Storm

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President reneges on pledge to include opposition in drafting highly-publicised amendments to the constitution.

The Kyrgyz president has unceremoniously disbanded a special committee designed to include the opposition and prominent members of the society in the constitutional reform process.

Civil rights activists have hit out at Askar Akaev after he replaced the constitutional committee with a so-called "expert group" on January 2. This is believed to consist almost entirely of presidential aides, and has only until January 13 to draw up its reform proposals.

The constitutional committee, as the process of widespread consultation and discussion has been called, was launched by presidential decree on August 26, 2002 in response to months of civil unrest in the former Soviet republic.

Six protesters died at the hands of the police in Aksy on March 17 last year during a demonstration in support of popular deputy Azimbek Beknazarov, who was jailed briefly after he had criticised the president for ceding a substantial amount of land to China some months earlier.

The deaths sparked a wave of demonstrations across the country, culminating in two abortive marches on Bishkek last autumn, and increased calls for the president's resignation.

The unrest showed no sign of abating until President Akaev agreed to make reforms and include opposition politicians and prominent members of Kyrgyz society in the process.

A secret memorandum - details of which were leaked to the public in November - was drawn up between the authorities and the Aksy demonstrators. This helped to stem any new protests in advance of Akaev's official visit to Washington last September.

The consultation process paid handsome dividends for the authorities. At a foreign donors' meeting in Bishkek last October, the Kyrgyz government was commended for its moves towards democracy - and 700 million US dollars of aid were pledged for the next few years.

Now, however, the opposition has been abruptly excluded from the final stages of the process.

The first sign that something was wrong came in December, when the president visited all six of the republic's regions and held meetings in which he was fiercely critical of the opposition.

"I have taken several steps towards them, but they haven't made even half a step in my direction," he told a meeting of party activists in Osh. "They continue to demand my resignation. I will not sit with them in the constitutional committee any more."

At a security council meeting on December 21, Akaev announced that the opposition now posed a major

threat to Kyrgyzstan's national security. Then on January 2, he issued a decree to create the expert group, and announced that he would no longer collaborate with the constitutional committee.

Later that day, deputy prime minister and deputy chairman of the committee, Kurmanbek Osmonov, confirmed that the body had "completed its work".

He insisted that the authorities are still willing to talk with its rivals, but that opposition radicals did not want dialogue. "Their stance is that whatever is bad for the government is good for them," he said.

Edil Bayasalov, director of the non-governmental organisation, Coalition For Democracy And Civil Society, a member of the constitutional committee, denounced the creation of the expert group.

"They are mistaken if they think they can pass off their own decisions as representing and arising from the hopes and aspirations of ordinary people," he warned. "The final proposals should have been the work of the constitutional committee."

Cholponkul Arabaev, head of the expert group and permanent representative of the president in parliament, insisted that any proposed constitutional amendments would be based on the final document produced by the constitutional committee. "There will not be any substantial changes, as the expert group does not possess the necessary mandate," he said.

Whatever the outcome, the move towards constitutional change has not addressed the original grievances which spawned the protests. Deputy Ismail Isakov, of the movement For Akaev's Resignation and Reforms For The People, warned that the people still want justice over the Aksy bloodshed.

And as the authorities prepare to put their constitutional proposals to a national referendum, Isakov warned that the opposition is also planning to go to the people.

There are plans to launch a petition to force an inquiry into the issue which sparked Kyrgyzstan's year of unrest - whether the ceding of land to China was legitimate within the terms of the constitution.

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Location: China
Kyrgyzstan

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