

## **Anti-Government Protests Solidify in South**

**Author:** [IWPR Central Asia](#)

In the major southern city of Osh, the regional government building is taken over by crowds calling for President Akaev's resignation.

A second provincial government building in Kyrgyzstan has been taken over as protests about the recent general election evolve into a more general campaign to force President Askar Akaev to step down.

Just after lunchtime on March 18, crowds of people who had protested for ten days outside the governor's office in the city of Osh – widely referred to as Kyrgyzstan's "southern capital" – surged into the building.

The storming came two weeks after protesters took over the regional government in Jalalabad, a neighbouring region in the south.

An employee of the prosecution service watched as events unfolded, "First, two people riding horses pushed their way through the special operations policemen guarding the building and then the protesters, most of them women, entered the building."

A civil servant who was inside the building at the time said, "There were people standing outside carrying banners as usual. We didn't notice them rushing into the building. The people inside quickly escaped into the street, and the protesters didn't touch them."

At least 400 people were holding the building as this report was published, with another 1,000 supporters outside it.

"The first thing they did was take down portraits of Akaev and rip them up. Then they started hanging up placards calling for the resignation of Akaev and the local authorities. The police stood observing all this quite placidly," said the civil servant.

Osh regional governor Kubanychbek Joldoshev was not in the building at the time. "The governor has fled. The authorities are afraid of the ordinary people," said Ishengul Boljurova, deputy chair of the opposition People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan, who is in the capital Bishkek but in regular phone contact with Osh.

"There is now dual power in the country. Popular rule is on its way."

Outside the Osh governor's building there was a heavy police presence with at least 1,500 officers in attendance, but they had clearly opted not to intervene and some were sympathetic to the protesters' demands.

"The police have today demonstrated in practice that it is ready to switch to the side of the people," said opposition leader Adakhan Madumarov.

"We are not using force," said a member of the Kyrgyz National Security Service, who preferred not to be named. "We are afraid of repeating the Aksy events."

The security officer was referring to the incident in 2002 in the southern town of Aksy when police opened fire on a crowd of demonstrators, resulting in six deaths. The shootings sparked months of protests against the authorities that spread to other parts of Kyrgyzstan.

In a region where politics often divides communities, the Osh demonstrators include members of the area's large ethnic Uzbek population as well as Kyrgyz. "The people demanding the early resignation of the president include quite a lot of Uzbeks," said Madumarov. "One more myth - that the Uzbeks implicitly support the current regime - has been shattered."

Many of the protesters came to the city from other parts of Osh region, including constituencies in Uzgen and Karakulja where they had been out on the streets supporting Madumarov and another opposition candidate, Duyshen Chotonov, who disputed the results of the general election, held in two rounds on February 27 and March 13.

Electoral officials in Uzgen initially announced that Madumarov, a leading figure in the Atajurt movement, had lost the second-round ballot in Uzgen to a pro-government candidate. But they reversed their decision and declared him the winner on March 15, following street demonstrations by up to 20,000 angry voters.

Supporters of Chotonov, the deputy chairman of the Ata Meken party, also staged protests in his Karakulja constituency after he lost his seat in the first round of voting. Many of them then set off on a two-day journey on foot to carry their protest to Osh, where they joined the growing crowds from elsewhere.

The dynamics of the Osh protests have shifted since then, and the principal focus appears to be a general call for Akaev to step down ahead of the presidential election scheduled for October. That would be in line with developments in Jalalabad city, where the opposition held a "kurultai", or congress, making similar demands on March 15. Roza Otunbaeva, the former diplomat who is co-chair of Atajurt, told IWPR a similar kurultai would take place in Osh on March 19.

Chotonov said the protesters holding the local government office would maintain good order while they awaited formal talks with the authorities.

"There will be police officers stationed on every floor of the building. Law and order must be upheld; that is their responsibility. Then we will held political negotiations," he said.

Otunbaeva sees developments so far as a victory for the opposition.

"It is not a takeover, but rather the complete demoralisation of the authorities. The government has collapsed by itself," she said. "An amazing thing has happened - the regime has fallen and is incapable of ruling. It is helpless in the face of the people."

While local protests by supporters of losing candidates continue across Kyrgyzstan, it is the south - a region traditionally resentful of the wealthier and politically powerful north - that has seen the most cohesive protests coordinated by the opposition. In the north, one provincial-level government building - in Talas region - has also been taken over by protesters, as has the Kochkor district administration in neighbouring Naryn.

Otunbaeva predicts that protests in the north will spread, "I believe the north will support the south. A popular wave has been unleashed and it can no longer be stopped."

Kyrgyz government officials, on the other hand, did their best to downplay the dramatic events in Osh – while simultaneously warning organisers that the authorities’ patience was rapidly running out.

“It’s only 500 people. It’s the supporters of losing candidates kicking up a row,” Bolot Januzakov, the deputy head of Akaev’s administration, told IWPR.

Dosaly Esenaliev, who heads the president’s press office, added, “Everyone is entitled to protest, but actions that amount to the takeover of power and the establishment of quasi-power structures are anti-constitutional. It is a clear case of extremism. The government has said from the outset that any election-related problems should be resolved within the framework of the law, through dialogue and negotiations.

“The government has been patient and tolerant for many days, but from now on it will act according to the law.”

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

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