

Bakiev Resigns After Support Crumbles

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President leaves country, steps down following failed attempt to rally support in southern heartland.

Ousted Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiev's unsuccessful attempt to stage a rally in the city of Osh is being seen by analysts as proof that attempting to mobilise the south against the interim authorities in Bishkek was a lost cause.

On April 15, soon after escaping from a rally he was trying to address in Osh when shots were fired, Bakiev left the country. The AKIpress news agency said he flew from Jalalabad, also in southern Kyrgyzstan, to Taraz in Kazakhstan.

Reuters news agency later quoted a source in the Kyrgyz interim government as saying Bakiev had signed a letter of resignation.

The Osh rally was only Bakiev's second attempt to rally support on a large scale since he left the capital Bishkek following protests and the emergence of an interim administration on April 6-7. A previous public meeting on April 13 saw some 4,000 supporters gather to support him in Jalalabad.

When he tried to repeat the exercise two days later in Osh – the second largest city after Bishkek and the “capital” of the south – the rally broke up before it ever really got under way.

Local journalist Isomidin Ahmedjanov witnessed the event and said Bakiev appeared before 2,000 to 3,000 people outside a theatre in the city centre.

As he stood at the podium, he spent several minutes gazing into the distance, as a separate crowd headed towards his own rally. These people had just come from a rival gathering in Osh's main square, which had been organised by the local authorities installed by the interim government in Bishkek.

“It was at this point that Bakiev's bodyguards fired several shots in the air, ushered him into a car and went off,” said Ahmedjanov.

Ahmedjanov said Osh was now calm, although most businesses were shut.

SOUTH VS. NORTH?

Since decamping to his home village of Teyit in the Jalalabad region, Bakiev has made a clear play for regional sympathy. In speeches to supporters he hinted that he had been ousted in a coup mounted by people from the north of Kyrgyzstan.

The divide between the wealthier, more Russified north and the poorer south has been a recurring issue in Kyrgyz politics. At a more local level, public figures often draw support from the particular region they come from, and below that, many Kyrgyz are conscious of tribal origin and kinship.

When Bakiev was swept to power by the “Tulip Revolution” of March 2005, getting the north-south balance was seen as so important that he initially appointed leading northern political figure Felix Kulov as his prime minister, while he could claim to represent southern interests.

Yet Bakiev came to power only by virtue of being part of a broad coalition opposed to then president Askar Akaev. Most of those politicians subsequently turned against him as his administration became more autocratic and less inclusive.

Despite his combative comments and attempt to rally support in the south, analysts say the regional factor has not dominated in the confrontation between Bakiev and the new government – as his failed rally in Osh and hurried departure from the country indicate.

Commentators say Bakiev managed to alienate as many southerners as northerners. Meanwhile, the new leadership includes politicians who hail from the south – Roza Otunbaeva from Osh and Omurbek Tekebaev from Jalalabad to name but two – as well as northerners like Almazbek Atambaev, and regional origin does not to be an issue among them.

The same applies to the Uzbek community which represents a significant proportion of the south's population. Few leading Uzbeks benefited from the distribution of jobs under Bakiev, and now prominent

leaders have come out in support of the interim administration.

In reality, support for Bakiev in the south was small and dwindling, and did not extend far beyond his immediate entourage, which included relatives and some officials who were promoted to good jobs in local government during his time in power.

Sheradil Baktygulov, a Bishkek-based expert on public administration, argued that in the final days, Bakiev only really had influence among his blood relatives. Other former allies appeared to be peeling off and looking to enter into new allegiances.

Baktygulov said that even participants in the rally Bakiev held in Jalalabad on April 13 reflected a range of public opinion.

“Eyewitnesses who attended the Jalalabad meeting in support of the president said that some of the people present expressed support for Bakiev, some were against him, and the rest were just onlookers,” he said.

Baktygulov says this was a fairly accurate description of the general political situation in Kyrgyzstan.

“Percentage-wise, the alignment of the participants gives an approximation of what’s been happening in the country over the last five years,” he explained.

Thus, he said, “The north-south divide is too simplistic a view of the current state of Kyrgyz politics.”

Cholpon Ergesheva, who represents the NGO Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society in Jalalabad, confirmed that the rally was attended by Bakiev supporters, opponents and those who were there just out of curiosity.

As long as Bakiev was holding out in Jalalabad region, some commentators expressed concern that Kyrgyzstan risked plunging into civil war between north and south. But analysts interviewed by IWPR said such concerns were unfounded.

Political scientist Alexander Knyazev said such a conflict was out of the question because most people in the south did not like Bakiev’s economic policies or the way he concentrated power the hands of family members.

“It isn’t going to be possible to play the regional card,” he said. “The north-south divide is too primitive a concept, and only those who neither know nor understand the country can talk about it.”

FAILED DREAMS

Analysts note that the hopes invested in Bakiev when he was elected in 2005 were largely dashed. His economic policies in the face of global financial meltdown were seen inadequate, and the price increases for electricity and central heating introduced earlier this year were the final straw for an exasperated population. It was these price hikes that triggered the final anti-Bakiev protests.

As Baktygulov put it, “The increased charges... resulted in people becoming simply unable to earn a living. So we got April 7,” he said, referring to the day the interim administration took power.

In his five years in office, Bakiev lost sight of the hardship facing people and ignored the simmering sense of discontent.

“When someone is isolated from reality and is hostage to his own illusions, people stop understanding him,” said Baktygulov. “That explains why so few people now support Bakiev.”

KYRGYZ OUTGROW LOCAL ALLEGIANCES

Nowadays, analysts say, alliances and divisions in Kyrgyzstan are much more complicated, and the idea of a straight regional power struggle no longer applies.

Baktygulov said stereotypes of clan and regional belonging certainly persist, so that a northern politician may be viewed as enjoying support from people in that part of the country. But at the same time, allegiances are widening to include, for example, people with shared commercial interests.

“Yes, we do have clan-based groups, but in Kyrgyzstan as in other Central Asian countries, ‘clans’ mean not only kinship ties but also coinciding business interests,” he said. Such groupings, he said, can encompass individuals of different origin as long as they share a common goal.

As for the average citizen of Kyrgyzstan, what really matters is whether a particular politician looks after his or her concerns, rather than that he has the right lineage.

“To an ordinary person, it doesn’t matter who represents him in parliament. The most important thing is that he has an opportunity to earn money and provide a decent living for himself and his nearest and dearest,” said Baktygulov.

Another thing that has changed over time is that the political freedom – albeit limited – that people have experienced since Kyrgyzstan became independent in 1991 has enabled the opposition to take part in the political process, and generated a vibrant civil society and independent media which expressed alternative views.

Knyazev said the recent political unrest was a product of a society that had “experienced what freedom is”.

“A society like that cannot have a medieval khanate imposed upon it. That’s unacceptable for Kyrgyz society,” he said. “And this is what it has led to.”

In the five years since the March revolution, people had evolved further, according to Baktygulov.

“Events since that time have changed these people, their mental approach, their way of thinking,” he said. “It’s an indication that now it isn’t important who you are or where you come from – now it’s your ideas that matter.”

Dina Tokbaeva is IWPR editor in Kyrgyzstan.

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