

Crime Fighters Fall Out in Kyrgyzstan

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The arrest of a senior security officer in Bishkek has sparked a major row between two powerful law-enforcement agencies.

Rival law enforcement bodies are at war in Kyrgyzstan, with allegations of wrongdoing flying furiously on both sides.

The country's parliament and the prime minister have both been forced to intervene in the row, which began on January 17 with the arrest of Aldayar Ismankulov, the head of the department for organised crime at the National Security Service or SNB, the successor to the Soviet-era KGB.

It was uniformed officers with the interior ministry who detained Ismankulov and opened a criminal investigation into allegations that he possessed illegal firearms. Police officers in the capital Bishkek allege he was found to have a pistol with the serial number removed, 10-15 grams of marijuana, another handgun and some ammunition.

However, they say their investigation came to an abrupt halt the day after his arrest, when Ismankulov's case was transferred to the prosecutor general's office, which released him after he promised not to leave town.

Interior Minister Muratbek Sotalinov said his officers were pressured by both the prosecutor's office and the SNB to hand over Ismankulov. He said SNB agents went so far as to encircle the police station where Ismankulov was being held, preventing his move to a detention centre.

Prosecutor-General Kambaraly Kongantiev hit back, pointing out that Ismankulov says he was set up by police who planted the weapons, drugs and ammunition – a claim Sotalinov rejects. Kongantiev also insists that police officers violated the criminal code, which stipulates that investigations involving military personnel must be passed to the military prosecutor.

However, Kongantiev denied that any bad feeling exists between Kyrgyzstan's law enforcement agencies, telling IWPR that "there is no confrontation among the power structures".

The interior ministry sees things differently. It took its complaints to parliament, which after heated discussions passed a decree recommending that President Kurmanbek Bakiev dismiss the head of the SNB, Tashtemir Aitbaev, along with the deputy chair of the country's Security Council, Vyacheslav Khan – the latter on the grounds that he holds Russian and Kazak nationality, as well as Kyrgyz, which is illegal here.

In their statement, the parliamentarians also criticised the law enforcement agencies' record in combating organised crime. Three members of parliament have been murdered in recent months along with one of the country's most famous sportsman, wrestler Raatbek Sanatbaev.

Prime Minister Felix Kulov then announced on January 25 that he was taking personal control over the interior ministry's organised crime division.

"An immediate reform of judicial power and the entire law enforcement system in general is necessary," Kulov said in a statement. "We cannot be reliant on the orders issued by corrupt, criminalised officials that the courts and the prosecutor's office decide to implement. We need to urgently review the staff working in them ... and ensure an influx of healthy and fresh staff, attracting honest, competent professionals."

When summoned to parliament to discuss the case, Aitbaev said he was ashamed of the SNB of which he is head and suggested it was staffed by people unsuitable for the job.

"More than 30 per cent coming to work for the SNB are from the tax and customs inspectorates and the police. There are no professionals, those have all left for Russia. That's why I appointed Ismankulov to his post - he had worked for the SNB for six years, graduated from the FSB [KGB successor] Academy in Russia, and is a qualified lawyer," he said.

Deputy Jantoro Satybaldiev summed up parliament's concerns about the dispute, saying, "The prosecutor's office, the SNB and the [interior ministry] are pulling in three different directions. They levelling accusations against each other so as to defend their respective institutions.

"But it's the people who suffer - they support these institutions with the taxes they pay."

Omurbek Babanov, also a deputy, believes the SNB chief should step down, "If Aitbaev leaves, it will significantly ease the work of other bodies and help to combat crime. The SNB is blocking the work of other institutions."

Political observer Nur Omarov believes the conflict between the two security agencies is serious, and means that the state is not currently able to guarantee the security of its citizens.

"Instead of taking control of the situation and fighting crime, the SNB, [the interior ministry] and the prosecutor general's office are engaged in publicly sorting out their relationships," he said.

"This is damaging the state as a whole, and only strengthens the image of Kyrgyzstan as an unreliable, criminal and scandal-ridden country."

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