

Electoral Abuse Claims Mar Kyrgyz Local Polls

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Two high-profile resignations and allegations of ballot-stuffing tarnish the latest exercise in democracy. Opposition parties and civil rights activists in Kyrgyzstan have disputed official claims that the October 5 local elections were a success, saying they observed so many breaches of procedure that the ballot counts as a setback for democracy.

The arguments come as the departure of Kyrgyzstan's election chief revived allegations that last December's parliamentary election – won outright by the pro-president Ak Jol party – were less than fair. Klara Kabilova, chair of the Central Electoral Commission, CEC, is now in self-imposed exile in Moscow after claiming she was intimidated by the son of President Kurmanbek Bakiev. (See **Kyrgyz Opposition Rears Head Over Video Scandal**, RCA No. 551, 08-Oct-08)

The CEC said turnout was 64 per cent for the nationwide elections to 7,647 seats on municipal and rural councils, for which more than 15,000 candidates were competing. The vast majority stood as independents, with only about 850 candidates formally nominated by Kyrgyzstan's political parties. Detailed results were not available when this report was published, but early signs were that Ak Jol had done well again, with its opposition rivals Ak Shumkar and Ata Meken getting few seats.

Among the problems reported by election observers were people finding their names missing from the electoral roll; voters being allowed into the polls without showing ID; busing people in en masse; multiple voting; the alteration of ballot papers; and plain bribery.

"The most basic violation is that many people couldn't find their names on the electoral registers," said Dinara Oshurakhunova of the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, a pressure group. She noted that in some cases, additional voter rolls were drawn up, of dubious legality.

Maksat Joldoshbekov from the Aliza Ene Charity Fund, who served as an election monitor, described what looked like a clear case of people being corralled in to vote when they were not on the electoral roll in the capital Bishkek.

"There was a building site near the polling station where some young men from a village [elsewhere] were working," he said. "Some people brought them in, they were 'registered' and they voted. We wrote a formal complaint about the case."

Omurbek Tekebaev, leader of the Ata Meken party, said the authorities did nothing to stop open attempts to buy votes.

"In Bazar-Korgon, my home in the south of the country, an Ata Meken member brought a court action against a school principal and another candidate, who entertained voters with food one day before the elections. The judge advised them to reconcile with each other, and when our candidate refused to do so, he lost his case," said Tekebaev. "I want to stress that this time round, vote-buying has happened on a massive scale."

Many observers claimed that election officials deployed to local polling stations were untrained and vulnerable to manipulation.

“The CEC has spent vast sums of money on training these people. But it turns out they are untrained and don’t even know how to fill in an election return,” said Elena Voronina, head of the Interbilim non-government group. “These elections were accompanied by gross violations on a massive scale, just as happened during last year [parliamentary] election.”

Many of the temporary staff the CEC hires at election time are teachers. One headmistress who took part, but did not want to be named, told IWPR, “I was amazed at the deftness of the tricks they performed. I felt sorry for the observers doing a pointless job. Commission officials deliberately sign reports using a pencil to create confusion, and fail to stamp the returns.”

She claimed that election staff were notified in advance about which candidates were to win, and they made sure this influenced the count.

“The names of the ‘golden four’ were known from the morning – the four candidates who were to win in the constituency. This happened everywhere,” she said.

Some NGO representatives said the absence of international observers made the electoral process less transparent.

International relations expert Askarbek Mambetaliev distributed a statement suggesting the failure to bring in foreign election monitors would look bad for Kyrgyzstan’s international image.

“The CEC itself should have an interest in having international observers participate so as to increase voter confidence,” he said in the statement.

However, a senior CEC official, Kudaybergen Bazarbaev, responded, “There’s no hidden political agenda. It’s just a matter of procedure. We received applications from international observers too late.”

In the face of mounting criticism, the CEC admitted that there had been a few minor problems but insisted there was nothing serious. As of October 9, it said it had received only 72 complaints and was looking into 46 of them

The CEC’s rebuffals of alleged abuses were phrased in unusually fierce language. Dismissing allegations made by the Taza Shailoo election monitoring group, the CEC’s new head Damir Lisovsky said, “Anything just to make a complaint. I don’t even know how to evaluate these reports.”

In a written statement, the CEC entered political territory by attacking opposition parties for claiming the ballot was unfair, describing such claims as “false, invented and entirely unfounded”.

“The position set out in the media by a number of opposition groupings is designed to destabilise the situation,” it went on. “This kind of statement should be regarded as defamatory.”

As the opposition Ata Meken made plans to contest the results for Bishkek city council, another party – this time a historically pro-government one – complained of major ballot-rigging.

In an interview for RFE/RL on October 8, Jany Kyrgyzstan’s secretary general Ismail Isakov alleged that government resources were deployed to shape the desired election outcome.

“Irregularities during the count have caused anger and outrage among citizens,” he said.

What is remarkable about Isakov’s criticisms is that they came from someone serving as secretary of the national Security Council, a key decision-making body in Kyrgyzstan.

On October 10, Isakov submitted his resignation from the council, citing disagreements with President Kurmanbek Bakiev’s domestic, foreign and personnel policies.

Analysts note that Jany Kyrgyzstan, one of the older parties which counts many senior figures among its members, has an axe to grind against the newcomer Ak Jol, which President Bakiev set up only two months before it swept the board in the December 2007 election.

In the interview, Isakov claimed that Ak Jol does not enjoy wide voter support, while in a statement on October 7, Jany Kyrgyzstan leaders blamed the government and Ak Jol for the current economic crisis, in which the whole country is suffering periodic power-cuts, and threatened to stage protests in November if things did not improve.

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