

## **Kazak Opposition Row**

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Main opposition parties bicker as elections loom.

Kazakhstan's upcoming local elections have sparked a bitter war of words among prominent opposition politicians.

As campaigning picks up on the eve of the September 20 ballot, Amirjan Kosanov, a senior official in the Republic People's Party of Kazakhstan, RPPK, published an internet article criticising the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, DCK, movement for taking part in the election race. Although Kosanov was writing as deputy head of the Democratic Forum, an umbrella grouping that includes the RPPK but not the DCK, it was believed he was speaking for his own party's leader, Akezhan Kazhegeldin, a former prime minister now exiled in the West.

On 20 September, Kazak voters will return candidates to district, city and provincial councils. The highest tier of elected local government, the provincial councils, will then have the right to appoint two representatives each to the senate, the upper chamber of parliament.

Kosanov claims that the DCK is unwittingly playing into the government's hands by standing in the poll, which his own party plans to boycott. By allowing the opposition to take part, he argues, the authorities can argue that they have made progress towards democracy. Kosanov believes that the election will be rigged and that very few opposition candidates will get through.

But DCK members say it is important to fight for political power through the system. "We need to act within the framework of the law when we try to win power," spokesman Vladimir Kozlov told IWPR.

Tolen Tokhtasynov, who heads the DCK's political council, said, "Right now the main task for the democratic forces is to turn this 'virtual opposition' into a systematic one, which seriously fights for power. This should not be done simply in one area, but throughout the whole power structure, from regional councils all the way up to the presidency."

The RPPK used to support the DCK, but tensions have arisen between the two this year. Analysts put this down to a fundamental difference in the two groups' ambitions and focus. Kazhegeldin - who has a history of confrontation with President Nazarbaev - is more radically opposed to the regime while the DCK is less confrontational, focusing on the need for democratic reforms.

While the row between Kazhegeldin and the DCK has been brewing for some time, observers fear that public outbursts may damage the opposition's standing - and its already slim election prospects. The disputes have already caused a sensation in local media.

"The disagreements between Kazhegeldin and the DCK may make the public stop taking the Kazak opposition seriously," warned independent political analyst Bakhtiar Baikmakhanov. "Its image will suffer, and this will play into the hands of the authorities."

The first serious conflict between the two groups emerged at the beginning of 2003. There was anger in the DCK that Kazhegeldin, despite previous statements, chose not to join their movement. Adding insult to injury, the former prime minister voiced open criticism of DCK policies via the radio and newspaper outlets close to his party.

"Kazhegeldin can break his agreements," complained Tokhtasynov. "He did not remember that he was ready to join the DCK, and join forces to oppose persecution by the regime."

Kosanov told IWPR that he shared Kazhegeldin's concerns. "I approve of the letter that he wrote. It was an attempt to make the DCK into a normal political opposition," he said.

DCK members say Kazhegeldin's assault on them is motivated by jealousy, claiming that he is angry because they are more popular than his party.

"Kazhegeldin has a leadership complex," said the DCK's Kozlov. "If someone reaches the same level as he perceives himself to be, he will immediately start criticising them in an attempt to make himself look better."

Alexander Zakharov is the pseudonym of a journalist in Almaty.

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