

Kyrgyzstan: Government Stung by Video Revelations

Author: [Sultan Jumagulov](#)

Opposition buoyed by discovery of film footage contradicting government's version of recent bloody protest.

The leadership of Kyrgyzstan has been thrown onto the defensive by a video that sharply challenges the government's handling of a recent demonstration, which ended in bloodshed.

Five people died in chaotic scenes on March 17-18 in the isolated Aksy region, after police broke up a group of protesters demanding the release from jail of a popular parliamentary deputy, Azimbek Beknazarov.

While regretting the deaths, the government consistently claimed that police confronted an armed, violent and intoxicated crowd of at least 2,000 and had been forced to open fire.

The recently uncovered video, which appears to have been made by the police, makes nonsense of these claims and has emboldened the country's opposition parties, who are now clamouring for the resignations of key officials and a presidential apology.

The main video cassette, which parliamentarians, journalists and rights activists watched on April 4-5, showed only 300 placard-carrying protesters, less than one-sixth of the number cited by Interior Minister Temirbek Akmataliev on March 18.

The footage did not show anyone carrying weapons - instead protesters could be seen panicking and running for cover after shots were fired from an unknown direction.

Equally damaging from the point of view of the authorities was a sequence from a morgue, showing the bodies of the dead protesters. One had been shot through the eye while another had a smashed head.

Byubyukan Dosalieva, a well-known journalist, said the footage totally contradicted official statements blaming the carnage on the demonstrators and risked turning the population against both the law enforcement agencies and the leadership.

"Until a few days ago, the authorities claimed an armed crowd, tanked up on alcohol, attacked the regional chiefs and law enforcement forces, after which the police was forced to use weapons," she said.

"The video footage proves the falsity of such statements... The militiamen received a few insignificant bruises, while citizens were dying in pools of blood."

The discovery of the video has proved a boon to opposition groups who have copied the footage and distributed it to several international bodies.

Security heads and pro-government deputies appear at a loss to explain the video revelations. National security service chief Kalyk Imankulov told parliament that no firm conclusions could be drawn from the

material and that a "more detailed cassette" - now in NSS hands - would provide a more rounded account of the Aksy events.

One head that is likely to roll is that of Akmataliev, the youthful interior minister appointed shortly before last month's incident.

But security chiefs and other top politicians are also feeling the heat. Ismail Isakov, the deputy spearheading parliament's investigation into the tragedy, called for government leaders and security chiefs at regional and republic level to quit. He also demanded a public apology from President Askar Akaev.

"After the shooting of his own citizens, the head of state doesn't have the moral or the political right to remain in power for another day," said human rights activist Topchubek Turgunaliyev.

The opposition plans to mobilise its forces for a major rally in Bishkek on April 17-18, where officials held guilty for the Aksy tragedy will be named and shamed. Another rally is planned on April 27 on the 40th day after the protesters' deaths.

The opposition hopes to marshal the groundswell of public revulsion against the government to assail the police over its planned purchase of rubber bullets.

The head of parliament's social issues committee, Adakhan Madumarov, complained that while the government could not find 3 million som (60,000 US dollars) for pensioners and war invalids, it had found 25 million som to buy ammunition for the police.

The opposition claims the only motive for this purchase is the president's fear of further street disturbances. "The bulk of the population is living in poverty but the government wants to take money from the budget to buy bullets to fight its own people," one opposition supporter said. "They should provide for some of the basic social needs of the public instead."

Sultan Jumagulov is an IWPR contributor

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