

Kyrgyz Coup Fears

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As demonstrators converged on the capital, local and foreign analysts voiced concerns over the republic's future.

The continuing unrest in Kyrgyzstan may trigger a nationwide protest that could topple President Askar Akaev's regime, analysts fear.

Ongoing tensions escalated last week when marchers demanding the punishment of officials blamed for the Aksy tragedy in March, in which six unarmed people were shot dead by police, were joined by supporters of opposition politicians Felix Kulov and Usen Sydykov, on the outskirts of Bishkek.

Kulov is serving a jail sentence after being convicted of abuse of power and Sydykov was barred from contesting the recent parliamentary elections.

Concerns that further protests could lead to a coup or even a civil war were voiced at a round table discussion organised by IWPR two days before the marchers reached the capital.

As well as local analysts, the meeting brought together a number of foreign Central Asia specialists, including Martha Brill Olcott of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Aleksei Malashenko, scholar-in-residence at the Carnegie Moscow Centre.

Olcott warned that if the opposition seized power it might struggle to fulfil the expectations of the people and might be cold-shouldered by the international community.

Kyrgyz opposition leader Adakhan Madumarov argued, however, that the West had once warned that it would only invest in the former Soviet Union under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, but continued to do so when Boris Yeltsin took over the reins of power.

Madumarov particularly stressed that the regime has not learnt any lessons from the events in Aksy. "Despite the numerous public promises, those responsible for the tragedy have not been punished, opposition politicians are persecuted, and the constitutional rights of voters are violated. The most recent clear example of this is the illegal dismissal of Usen Sydykov from the elections," he said.

"If the situation develops in this direction, these actions may take on an irreversible nature and the people's response to them may become uncontrollable."

Marat Tazabekov, a well-known analyst and head of the media holding AKI-Press, said that the events in Aksy and the subsequent confrontations between the authorities and the people have done irreparable damage to the regime - and warned that the situation will only get worse.

"The government has virtually no control of the situation, and the force of the people is gaining dominance. The current regime has only one chance to hold on to power - to shoot several demonstrators to scare the population. But that is a road to nowhere. If that happens, there will be no western aid and no future," he said.

Aleksei Malashenko compared President Akaev to Gorbachev in his final days of power, but he also criticised the opposition.

"Boris Yeltsin came after Gorbachev, but in Kyrgyzstan there is only a void, as far as I can see," he said. "Everything the opposition says is right, but they suggest nothing constructive. All they say is that the regime needs to be changed, factories need to be revived and that the peasants should be given money."

He also suggested that the opposition all had different agendas and lacked a common goal. "I have absolutely no idea what they are really fighting for. What is happening now in Kyrgyzstan could be called a crisis - the Russian word for it is bardak (total mess). And everyone is to blame for this - the opposition as well as Akaev," he said

Kyrgyz analyst Turat Akimov said the opposition lacked someone capable of taking over from Akaev. "There is an active search for an alternative, but at the moment there is no politician among the opposition who would make a credible national leader. The hunt may go on until 2005 (when Akaev is due to leave office)," he said.

As the analysts debated the republic's future, the National Security Service and the internal affairs ministry stepped up patrols and sealed off the centre of Bishkek in an attempt to thwart the protesters.

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