

Kyrgyz Election Update

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In the final update on the campaign for the February 27 parliamentary election in Kyrgyzstan, IWPR looks at key events of the week (RCA No. 352, 25-Feb-05)

Thousands of people across Kyrgyzstan have taken to the streets to back election candidates disqualified from running in the parliamentary poll.

The protests are widespread, spanning four regions of Kyrgyzstan – Issykkul, Talas, Naryn and Jalalabad.

Many of the candidates involved are not associated with the opposition, and are either pro-government or not aligned with either side. They allege these individuals have been barred from running on spurious grounds, to allow the regime to insert its current favourites into local constituencies and ensure there are no strong rivals to prevent them being elected to parliament.

The wave of discontent began February 21 in Talas where 2,000 supporters of parliamentary hopeful Ravshan Jeenbekov demonstrated outside a local court house to protest the revoking of his registration. The decision was eventually reversed so that Jeenbekov was able to stand. Also in Talas, 800 followers of candidate Bolotbek Sherniyazov gathered to protest interference by the local electricity company, which promised to wipe out unpaid electricity bills for voters who backed Sherniyazov's rival, ex-speaker of parliament Altai Borubaev.

Demonstrators in the Issykkul region scored a notable victory after they blocked roads in Tyup and forced officials to lift their disqualification of a local candidate, Sadyr Japarov. Elsewhere in the region, protesters occupied a local government building but as of February 25, their candidate Arslan Maliev remained disqualified.

POLICE READY FOR TROUBLE

The interior ministry on February 24 placed Kyrgyz security forces on high alert for an indefinite period of time. Police officers will guard polling stations around the clock.

MIGRANTS DEMAND RIGHT TO VOTE

Labour migrants in Russia will take legal action against the Kyrgyz government for denying citizens working abroad the right to vote, the AKIpress news agency reported on February 21. They plan to file a civil rights case with the International Court of Justice.

FAIR ELECTIONS AT ISSUE

Central Election Committee, CEC, chairman Sulaiman Imanbaev has spoken out against informal exit polls which non-government organisations plan to conduct. He said such polls would violate ballot secrecy, they would be inaccurate, and that they would be used to manipulate election results. Separately, Imanbaev announced election results will be available live on the internet and on state television, using a computerised election-tally system.

On February 23, the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, IHF, issued a press release saying the Kyrgyz authorities were violating their OSCE commitments by interfering in the election. IHF executive director Aaron Rhodes accused the government of “attempting to prevent a free and fair election”.

The embassy of Kazakhstan announced that the country will have more than 60 monitors observing the election. A total of 15,000 local and 600 international observers will be on hand, according to the CEC.

MEDIA CURBS CRITICISED

On February 24, state regulators closed Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Kyrgyz service, Azattyk, for an undisclosed period. The authorities recently announced they would be auctioning off the local frequencies which Azattyk now uses to broadcast, under the pretext of raising money to modernise the radio network.

Electricity to the United States-funded Independent Printing House in Bishkek, where most opposition newspapers are printed, was cut on February 22. Observers suspect a power outage so soon before the election was a deliberate attempt to prevent the printing of more than 40 newspapers and other publications, some but not all of which are critical of the regime. However, plant officials used a generator to continue printing, and plan to sue the electricity company.

President Akaev said on February 18 that he intends to sue the opposition newspaper Moya Stolitsa Novosti, MSN, for libelling him. The following day, more than 200 protestors gathered in Bishkek in support of MSN. The international Reporters Without Borders group warned President Askar Akaev that a diversity of media outlets is essential for a fair electoral process to take place.

The independent media commissioner, Shamaral Maichiev, has accused certain journalists of breaching the electoral legislation in their reporting, for example by giving preferential treatment to certain candidates and publishing campaign material sooner than they were entitled to.

On February 22, the independent Mass Media Association, a local journalists’ organisation, unveiled a handbook for Kyrgyz journalists containing guidelines on how the media should conduct itself during elections.

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