

Kyrgyz Officials Send Pre-Election Warning

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Protesters' arrests seen as signal that authorities won't put up with unrest in advance of next year's elections.

The arrests of several people involved in a peaceful demonstration in support of jailed opposition leader Felix Kulov is a sign that the Kyrgyz government will not tolerate any trouble in the run-up to parliamentary and presidential elections next year, opposition figures say.

Eighteen people were detained in connection with the protest on April 15, in which dozens of civil society activists and relatives of Kulov marched towards the prison where he is being held.

- Police breaking up the march.
- A relative of Felix Kulov detained by the police.
- Human rights activist Tursunbek Akunov being arrested. *Photos © Vladimir Pirogov*

Officials said the demonstration had disrupted arrangements for an important meeting of CIS leaders and that they had responded accordingly.

But a number of observers criticised the government's heavy-handed approach.

The 50 or so protestors ran into a police road-block as they approached the prison along a highway which leads to Kyrgyzstan's main airport. Upon being stopped, they unfolded banners on the pavement and began making speeches calling for Kulov to be released.

Karybek Baibosunov, a pro-government political analyst, described the actions of Kulov's supporters as "unserious and undermining the authority of the famous figure [Kulov] once and for all".

"This is the fourth year that they are staging demonstrations and marches, and we are seeing the same slogans, same methods. But the number of their supporters is not growing, and international organisations also stopped paying attention," Baibosunov told IWPR.

But police officers moved quickly to intervene in the protest.

Despite resistance from the demonstrators, several policemen dragged Tursunbek Akunov, chairman of the Public Committee to Free Kulov, Tolekan Ismailova, head of the NGO Civil Society Against Corruption, and Arnams party leader Emil Aliev into their bus. Of eighteen people detained in total, three were released afterwards.

Following a series of hastily arranged trials, Tursunbek Akunov and Tolekan Ismailova, along with a third rights activist, Aziza Abdrasulova, were each fined 20 US dollars for violating public order, and the remaining 12 detainees were released with a formal warning.

Keneshbek Duishebaev, head of the internal affairs department in Bishkek, said the police intervened in the protest because it would otherwise have disrupted an important regional conference.

"We had warned the demonstrators that today the meeting of the Council of Heads of CIS Governments would be held, and the delegations would be passing here," he said.

"This unsanctioned procession on the roadway would have posed a threat to safety of movement both for transport and the delegations, and it would have disrupted public order," he added, arguing that the protest's organisers had sought to attract public attention with the timing of the event.

His deputy Tiablin agreed. "This is pure provocation on the part of the organisers," he said. "We even had to change the itinerary for the delegations."

A successful politician in his time, Felix Kulov held the positions of vice-president, national security minister and mayor of Bishkek.

He was arrested in March 2000 on abuse of office charges, shortly after announcing his intention to compete in that year's presidential elections. Having been acquitted in July, he was later rearrested and, following a lengthy trial, the Pervomaisky district court of Bishkek sentenced him to ten years imprisonment in 2002.

On July 19, 2003 Kyrgyz president Askar Akaev called Kulov a major criminal, saying he had caused irreparable economic and political damage to the country.

But Kulov's supporters maintain that he is a political prisoner and insist he was jailed because he was viewed as a threat to Akaev's power.

Opposition figures say the recent round of arrests was a further attempt to suppress the voices of those opposed to the government, regardless of their rights.

"As chairman of the legality committee, I maintain that those detainees did not break any laws. But the employees of the Pervomaisky police department did violate human rights by their actions," said opposition deputy Azimbek Beknazarov.

"This unlawful mass detention of peaceful citizens revealed the true face of the authorities," agreed Akunov. "Any attempts to express independent opinion are suppressed."

Ismailova told IWPR that her experiences had left her with the feeling that "we are living in a police state".

"All orders came from [high-ranking government officials] all actions were coordinated by telephone," she said. "We saw it. And ordinary policemen were upset, saying to us privately, 'Please understand, they are making us do this'."

Well-known journalist Bektash Shamshiev says the Kyrgyz authorities are especially keen to limit unrest in the run-up to parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for next year.

"The events in Georgia and what is now happening in Armenia force the Kyrgyz government to choose a very violent method of nipping oppositional moods in the bud," she said.

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