

## **Kyrgyz Opposition Defers Ultimatum**

**Author:** [IWPR Central Asia](#)

The opposition sets the government yet another deadline to reform or resign.

The opposition in Kyrgyzstan has failed to achieve the definitive results it hoped its mass protest meeting in Bishkek last weekend would bring, and the stand-off with the government looks set to drag on over the summer months.

At a similar rally held on April 29, organisers from the Movement for Reforms promised that the May 27 demonstration would give the authorities an ultimatum to ensure that long-promised reforms were finally addressed, including the removal of government members blamed for some of Kyrgyzstan's social and economic ills.

But on May 10, President Kurmanbek Bakiev took some of the wind out of his opponents' sails by sacking key government officials including National Security Service chief Tashtemir Aitbaev, Secretary of State Dastan Sarygulov and the head of the presidential administration, Usen Sydykov.

The same day, the impact of another opposition demand - for the authorities to curb a wave of crime - was also softened, though not in the way the government or its critics would have chosen. Ryspek Akmatbaev, a prominent figure whose alleged links with organised crime embodied the opposition's concerns, was shot dead in the street by unknown assailants.

The May 27 rally, which brought 10,000-strong crowd onto Bishkek's central Alatau Square, therefore focused instead on other matters including the outstanding issue of constitutional reform.

After months of debate by a large "constitutional conference" convened by the president, attempts to devise a new governing structure for Kyrgyzstan to replace the system left by ousted president Askar Akaev foundered on the issue of whether president or legislature should have the upper hand.

The rally concluded with threats to seek President Bakiev's resignation if he fails to submit a new draft of the constitution to parliament by September.

Other demands made at the end of the meeting included calls for economic reforms, greater freedom of speech and stronger independent media.

Two of the demands listed by Kubatbek Baibolov, a member of parliament and head of the Union of Democratic Forces, were especially close to home for the Bakiev administration.

He said Akaev-era officials must be held accountable for the Aksy shootings of 2002. At the time of the incident, in which six people died after police opened fire on a crowd of demonstrators in southern Kyrgyzstan, Bakiev was prime minister. He later resigned and joined the anti-Akaev opposition.

Secondly, Baibolov demanded an end to government officials using their positions to acquire businesses for themselves or family members. This echoed slogans chanted by the crowd - in pithier language -

accusing Bakiev of facilitating business acquisitions by his son Maxim.

Almazbek Atambaev, co-chairman of the Movement for Reform, told rally participants that all of the companies that formerly belonged to members of the Akaev family were now in the hands of the new regime. "Why can't we prove this? Because they've registered them in other people's names," he said.

Another serious accusation levelled at the authorities was that their policies tended to set the north and south of Kyrgyzstan against one another. The regional divide has long been viewed as a potentially explosive issue, and the current division of posts between southerner Bakiev and Prime Minister Felix Bakiev, who comes from the wealthier north, was forged last year in an attempt to create a balance.

"People of good will have gathered here today to tell the current regime that we are opposed to those who would divide us," parliamentary deputy Dooronbek Sadyrbaev told the crowd. "The regime says the interests of the northern Kyrgyz run contrary to those of the southerners. They are tearing our people into pieces and dividing us like sheep. We want to tell this regime to go."

The only senior administration figure present at the rally was Tursunbek Akunov, chairman of the presidential committee for human rights, who stressed that the administration had already moved some way towards addressing the opposition's concerns.

Prior to the rally, it was apparent that the Bakiev administration was worried about the mass protest, which was organised not by pro-Akaev elements but by many of the individuals and political groups who were instrumental in bringing Bakiev to power in last year's March revolution.

One of the measures taken to avert this show of public anger degenerated into farce and humiliating defeat.

Five days before the rally was scheduled to take place, Defence Minister Ismail Isakov announced that Alatoo Square would - by pure coincidence - be taken up by an army extravaganza to celebrate two military dates falling on May 28 and 29.

Isakov said that the protesters should find a different venue and not obstruct the military events, which included a concert and awards ceremony, plus a ballroom dancing competition.

The opposition hit back, suggesting that defence chiefs pay more attention to their under-resourced conscripts rather than hosting elaborate events.

"Let the defence minister buy the soldiers some underwear and uniforms instead of holding celebrations," said parliamentary deputy Taalay Subanbekov.

On May 26, the day before protesters, soldiers and ballroom dancers were due to converge on central Bishkek, the defence ministry sounded the retreat and cancelled the party.

With the rally over, the Movement for Reforms has given the government another three months to produce

some results before the opposition starts protesting again. Next time, opposition politicians promise, they will be seeking the resignations of both president and prime minister if they deem progress on reforms to be insufficient.

“This was the last demonstration of the season, and we have stated officially that we are giving the regime three months, and expect an official answer from it at the beginning of September. If just one of our demands is not met, we will demand the resignation of the tandem,” said opposition deputy Melis Eshimkanov, referring to the Bakiev-Kulov alliance.

For the opposition, there is a danger that all-or-nothing demands for senior heads to roll will begin to lose their force if ultimatums are deferred from one protest meeting to the next.

Elmira Nogoibaeva of the International Strategic Studies Centre, which is associated with President Bakiev’s office, said, “One gets the impression that the last demonstration and this latest one did not differ fundamentally in any way.

“If nothing changes in the coming three months, then the same kind of demonstration will probably take place in September, only on a smaller scale, with fewer participants, and less impact.”

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**Location:** [Kyrgyzstan](#)

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