

Kyrgyz Opposition Fails to Seize Initiative

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A new round of protests is promised at the end of October, but some doubt the opposition has the willpower needed to take on the president.

Opposition parties in Kyrgyzstan are planning to seek the resignation of the country's president and prime minister - but not quite yet. A recent gathering offered them a chance to deal a blow to the authorities as they struggled to cope with a major political scandal, yet little came of the meeting, and it is now unclear whether the government's opponents are capable of much more than dire threats.

The September 17 "kurultai", or popular assembly, should have had everything going for it. It brought together major political parties - the Movement for Reforms, MfR, an umbrella group encompassing most opposition parties, and the Asaba party of Azimbek Beknazarov, a high-profile member of parliament.

There was a lot to complain about - the failure of President Kurmanbek Bakiev to deliver the reforms demanded at opposition rallies earlier this year, and a fresh political row about Omurbek Tekebaev, the MfR's leader and until February 2006, the speaker of parliament.

Tekebaev was arrested at Warsaw airport on September 6 when more than half a kilogramme of heroin was found in his luggage. However, he was quickly released after a Polish court ruled that he was the victim of a dirty tricks campaign. Kyrgyzstan's parliament began a vigorous investigation of the matter, and came up with evidence implicating the security service or SNB in planting the drugs.

Following the revelations, the president was forced to sack his brother Janysh Bakiev as deputy head of the SNB; the agency's head Busurmankul Tabaldiev resigned shortly afterwards.

Finally, organisers chose a venue that was full of symbolism. The village of Bozpiek is located in the southern district of Aksy, where in 2002, police firing live rounds caused the deaths of six people engaged in peaceful protests, sparking months of demonstrations against the government of President Askar Akaev.

Aksy is Beknazarov's power-base, and the demonstrators were seeking his release after the Akaev regime jailed him. Bakiev, though he later joined the opposition and took part in the March 2005 revolution that ousted Akaev, was prime minister at the time and thus, according to his critics, to some extent accountable for the violence.

The kurultai got off to a good start, according to Dooronbek Sadyrbaev, a member of parliament who attended. "There were many hard-hitting, critical speeches about the country's present leaders. Speaker after speaker demanded the resignation of the Bakiev-Kulov 'tandem'," he said, referring to the alliance between the president and his prime minister, Felix Kulov.

The meeting ended with a six-point list of demands to the Bakiev government, calling for a new constitution and other reforms, and urging the president to dismiss other family members from his administration. Two of his brothers serve as Kyrgyzstan's ambassador to Germany and counsellor at its Beijing embassy.

The statement warned that if these demands were not met, opposition parties would seek the resignations

of both Bakiev and Kulov. A deadline of October 24 was set, coinciding with the end of Ramadhan, the holy month in which Muslims fast and strive for restraint and forgiveness.

After staging protest rallies in the spring, the opposition suspended its protests over the summer, and the decision to postpone action for another month raises questions about whether the anti-Bakiev movement has lost momentum. Although the statement also called for the prosecution of those found to have ordered the Tekebaev incident, some analysts say opposition politicians have passed up a golden opportunity to target the president.

“If nothing happens at the end of October, another demand will be heard - for Bakiev and Kulov to resign. It may take a month or even years, but people will insist on them resigning,” said Temir Sariev, a member of parliament and kurultai participant.

“There are some people who say that we’re constantly postponing matters and that we don’t want the situation to develop in the way they want, using force. [But if we did that], the authorities would use force as well and we’d plunge the country into chaos.”

Another deputy, Melis Eshimkanov, took a similar view, saying, “We are postponing the deadline... because of our responsibility to avoid civil war and conflict. We are giving the regime another chance... we are saying, ‘Bakiev, sort things out’.”

“After Orozo Ait [Eid al-Fitr, the end of Ramadhan], the opposition will take very serious actions, tougher and more practical. We see the political struggle growing more intense then. So now we are giving the people and ourselves a breather, and are giving the president carte blanche to meet our demands.”

This threat of future action does not convince the political analysts interviewed by IWPR.

Tamerlan Ibraimov, for example, believes that come November, the opposition will be more vocal, but he says this will not force the Kyrgyz leadership to resign, and will merely drive his opponents to take up more radical positions.

Valentin Bogatyrev, deputy director of Vostok, a Central Asian think-tank, believes that Bakiev is in fact making tentative concessions, even if the opposition prefers not to notice them.

“The opposition feels it should constantly pressure the government, and that the important issues have not been tackled,” he told IWPR. “But it seems to me that the Bakiev administration is far from inactive. For example, has he reacted to the kurultai by sending constitutional drafts to parliament, and if the latter responds appropriately and realises that compromise does not mean weakness or retreat, but can bring progress toward reform, then everything will be fine. Usually the problem is that the administration does not want a compromise, but that is not the case at the moment.”

Bogatyrev pointed to what he sees as a lack of real drive among opposition members, “The problems with this kurultai and the way the [Tekebaev] scandal has developed indicate that the opposition has no drive. It’s hard to pinpoint exactly what it is they are missing - money, ideas or leaders capable of fighting for their views. But what is clear is that they’ve been unable to make intelligent use of a gift like this scandal.”

That criticism may not be entirely fair, though. In the Tekebaev affair, the Kyrgyz parliament showed itself resolute and uncompromising in pursuing the truth. On September 22, it kept up the momentum by declaring the Bakiev-Kulov “tandem” to be unconstitutional in that there is no provision for prime ministers to be appointed on the basis of a pre-election deal with the president. It urged Bakiev to form a new cabinet, to embark on constitutional reform post haste, and to place the SNB firmly under government control.

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