

## **Kyrgyz Opposition Rally Looms**

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Failure of government and opposition to hold crisis talks may lead to civil unrest.

Political unrest in Kyrgyzstan is looming following the failure of the authorities and the opposition to hold talks over the latter's demands for root-and-branch reforms.

The opposition is threatening to hold a mass rally on November 2 to demand the resignation of President Kurmanbek Bakiev and Prime Minister Felix Kulov who they claim are plunging the country into a political crisis.

The authorities and the opposition blame each other for the cancellation of October 21 talks aimed at resolving their differences.

The opposition is demanding rapid constitutional reform, a new coalition government, transformation of the state broadcaster into a public television service, and the resignations of the Kyrgyz prosecutor general and the Bishkek police chief.

There's still hope of another meeting being arranged in the next few days, but some in the main opposition grouping Movement for Reforms say they've lost patience with the country's leadership.

The opposition says the October 21 meeting was to have taken place between 14 of its members - including human rights advocates, leaders of NGOs and the other civil society groups - and Bakiev, Kulov, the head of the presidential administration and the secretary of state.

Opposition parliamentary deputy Melis Eshimkanov claims that half an hour before the talks were due to start, the president decided to invite another 15 politicians, provoking the Movement for Reform boycott.

"We realised that the president wanted to turn the talks into a debate, and to act as an observer. The meeting would have turned into a pointless discussion, and our demands would have remained just empty words," he said.

For their parts, the authorities are claiming that the opposition have acted in bad faith. A statement from the presidential press service said that the Movement for Reform had objected to the government team including one additional representative, Supreme Court head Kurmanbek Osmonov. But when officials agreed to stick to their original line-up for the talks, the opposition was no longer prepared to meet, said the statement.

Officials have lambasted the opposition for telling the media that they are not interested in dialogue, insisting that they want to talk while their opponents are only interested in ultimatums.

Most members of the Movement for Reform are still prepared to meet officials. Its leader, Omurbek Tekebaev, said, "We are prepared for a second round of talks. But we must reach an agreement that they will be sincere and productive. It is possible to come to a consensus, but a clear and precise position from

the head of state is required for this.”

However, a number of prominent opposition representatives, including parliamentary deputies Azimbek Beknazarov and Almazbek Atambaev, appear to have lost patience with the government and seem determined to press ahead with the planned demonstration.

Beknazarov suggests that Bakiev is more interested in trying to co-opt members of the opposition than having meaningful discussions with them.

“Instead of listening to our demands, the authorities send various officials to us, and promise high government position. Then the president makes a puzzled face and says that he did not give anyone the authority to conduct such talks,” he said.

He warned that “if there are no talks before November 2, then dialogue with the Kyrgyzstan authorities will take place on the square”.

Atambaev was more scathing of Bakiev and the recent aborted talks. “I knew that the meeting would turn into a farce. I don’t think that you should go to talks with a ‘political corpse’ - a man who is the head of the country and deceives his people. Unfortunately, in place of [former president Askar] Akaev an even more terrible man has come to power,” he told IWPR

Amid growing speculation that the threatened opposition protest could escalate into a coup attempt or possible civil conflict, both politicians have been keen to stress that any rally would be peaceful.

“We know there are people who want to cause riots - but there will not be any riots,” said Beknazarov. And Atambaev insisted there were no plans to seize government offices, “We will set up tents in the square and stay there until [Bakiev] resigns.”

Political commentators are not surprised by the failure of the opposition and the authorities to sit down and talk, because they say the two sides are so at odds with each other. They now suspect that matters will only get worse, possibly culminating in a violent confrontation.

“The fact that the talks did not take place could be expected, as the positions of the two sides are too diametrically opposed,” said analyst Nur Omarov. “ So the conflict will probably deepen. As for November 2, there is a high likelihood of clashes between the protesting opposition and supporters of the authorities. But in this situation, everything depends on the authorities, and how they react to the demands put forward by the opposition.”

On October 27, President Bakiev attended a roundtable meeting on constitutional reform. Some members of the Movement for Reform were also there, but senior politicians from the grouping such as Beknazarov and Atambaev refused to attend, telling the media they did not want the event to be depicted as some kind of formal negotiation between the government and its opponents.

Taalibek Amanov is a regular IWPR contributor.

**Location:** Kyrgyzstan

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