

Kyrgyz Opposition Rears Head Over Video Scandal

Author: [Yrys Kadykeev](#)

Election official's claims of intimidation taken up as an opposition cause.

The resignation of Kyrgyzstan's election chief last month came as an unexpected gift for the country's opposition parties, which attempted to capitalise on the controversy after months of apparent drift.

However, Klara Kabilova, chair of the Central Electoral Commission, has since distanced herself from the opposition, saying she refuses to be part of their political agenda. One local analyst argues that the real confrontation going on behind the scenes is not between opposition and government, but between rival factions in the ruling elite.

On September 26, a recorded statement by Kabilova was made public; in it she claimed she had been unfairly pressured after she asked for the release of a candidate for the October 5 local elections, currently in police custody. In the video recording, she said she was visited by Maxim Bakiev, the son of Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiev, who employed "outrageous pressure and obscene insults" to intimidate her.

Maxim Bakiev, a prominent local businessman, has denied the claims outright, saying he never even contacted Kabilova. After prosecutors questioned him about the case, he gave an interview to the Bishkek Press Club on September 30 at which he said, "I am certain that all these intrigues surrounding the video recording in which I'm mentioned are designed merely to sully the president's reputation."

The main opposition parties seized on the issue, airing the video of Kabilova's statement at a September 26 press conference.

One party, Ak Shumkar, said that in view of Kabilova's allegations, the results of the parliamentary election held last December should be cancelled on the grounds that they were unfair. It also wants all the CEC's members to step down.

The December election was won by Ak Jol, a party set up only two months before the polls, and even the leading opposition party, Ata Meken, failed to win a single seat. Opposition groups are concerned that ten months on, the CEC has yet to publish a detailed breakdown of the ballot results.

The opposition press conference had swift repercussions – within a few hours, President Bakiev sacked Kabilova, while her colleagues in the CEC lined up to accuse her of seeking to escape liability for any procedural abuses committed while she was in office.

Her interim replacement, Damir Lisovsky, said, "We CEC members are extremely indignant at the irresponsible and provocative statement made by Klara Kabilova. Her lack of professionalism has placed the local council elections in jeopardy. Kabilova's statement is an attempt to shirk responsibility."

Opposition leaders claim that Kabilova went into hiding on September 20, made the tape five days later, and later fled the country after unsuccessfully seeking protection from the National Security Service. The former elections chief has not herself confirmed this sequence of events, although it is clear she is now in Moscow.

Ata Meken leader Omurbek Tekebaev suggested that more revelations might be on the way. "She fears for her life but she's ready to fight," he said of Kabilova. "It's possible that in the near future she will make other statements regarding last year's parliamentary election."

The Kyrgyz opposition has been notably silent this year, in contrast to the mass demonstrations it had staged on several occasions since the March 2005 revolution that brought President Bakiev and his administration to power. Many analysts believed the opposition's failure to achieve significant victories through protest actions, coupled with its effective exclusion from the legislature in last December's polls, had left it with no real sense of direction.

Now the Kabilova controversy has given the opposition a real issue to get its teeth into.

"After the early parliamentary election, the opposition and specifically Ata Meken were pushed into the background," political commentator Toktogul Kakchekeev told IWPR. "Kabilova's statement has given the opposition carte blanche to contest the election results in a real way. Even though the Kyrgyz judicial system is subservient [to government], the opposition will be able to use this statement during the presidential election in two years' time. It could be their ace card."

Dinara Oshurakhunova, who heads the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, hopes Kabilova will reveal all about past violations of election procedure. "She must tell the truth about the results of the 2007 parliamentary election. Publication of these facts would ultimately help to prove that the current [legislative] body is illegitimate," she said.

Meanwhile, the authorities and their allies have moved to limit the damage and prevent the opposition from exploiting the case.

Kabay Karabekov of the pro-presidential Ak Jol party said Maxim Bakiev had no reason to intimidate the CEC head, especially since the October elections were merely for local councils and would not reshape the political landscape.

The prosecution service appears to have shifted the focus of its investigation, launched a day after the opposition showed the Kabilova video. Having begun by looking into a possible case of interference in the electoral process and questioning most of the CEC's members as well as Maxim Bakiev, it now seems to have turned its attention to the question of how the opposition got hold of the offending video. Opposition leaders who attended the press conference were summoned for questioning on October 2.

As chief prosecutor Elmurza Satybaldiev put it, "it is important for the investigation to recreate the sequence of events that preceded Klara Kabilova's vocal statement".

Cholpon Jakypova of the legal aid group Adilet told the 24.kg news agency that investigating prosecutors were interested "not in the content of the former CEC chief's statement but in how the recording reached the opposition, in other words who it came from and who gave permission to air it".

In Moscow, Kabilova sought to distance herself from opposition activists. After speaking to her by phone, Kyrgyzstan's human rights ombudsman Tursunbek Akun told 24.kg that the ex-CEC head confirmed the authenticity of the videotape but that she had intended her statement for "the public, not the opposition"

and was “astounded” that it had ended up in the hands of opposition leaders.

She insisted, said Akun, that “she has nothing in common with opponents of the authorities”.

One local analyst believes the controversy is not about fair elections or about opposition-government relations. According to Mars Sariev, “There are two groupings around the president – one comprising his son Maxim Bakiev and presidential administration chief Medet Sadyrkulov, and the other including his brother Janysh Bakiev and others.” Kabilova is said to be close to the latter group.

“Effectively what we have is a struggle for resources going on around the president,” added Sariev.

To complicate matters, Sariev said the Maxim Bakiev/Sadyrkulov faction has won backing from movers and shakers in the north of Kyrgyzstan, while the other group derives its power from the south. In a country where regionalism plays an important part in politics, the Bakiev administration has traditionally been associated with southern Kyrgyzstan.

To prevent this factional rivalry opening up the regional divide, President Bakiev must “balance between these groups and work in the interests of the entire republic, not just the south”.

In an interview he gave during the October 5 local elections, the president responded to allegations that he was under the influence of powerful elite factions.

“It’s very difficult to influence me – pressuring the president is a thankless task,” he said. “Individuals or groups that try to do so find themselves in an awkward position. I always listen to what those around me say, but I take the decisions.”

For the moment, it looks as though the president will ride this crisis out.

In the interview, he speculated that Kabilova had fallen prey to “games played by politicians” and insisted that last year’s election was fair.

Some analysts are predicting that Bakiev will attempt to co-opt some of his opponents into government, as he has done in the past. It would make sense for him to consolidate his position politically, they say, as he has some serious problems to cope with in the real world.

Winter is on the way, and some forecasters are predicting a repeat of last year’s exceptionally harsh weather. Kyrgyzstan is already experiencing power cuts because it is unable to generate enough electricity, and high world fuel prices are making imports prohibitively expensive.

Yrys Kadykeev is an IWPR-trained journalist in Bishkek. Aida Kasymalieva, IWPR’s editor for Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, contributed additional reporting.

Location: Kyrgyzstan

Focus: Central Asia

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyz-opposition-rears-head-over-video>

