

## **Kyrgyz Politicians Court the Young**

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On the eve of elections, young people are getting involved in politics.

As parliamentary and presidential elections draw near, groups on both sides of the political divide are trying to woo Kyrgyzstan's young voters.

A new youth party linked to the opposition Atajurt movement is the latest arrival on the political scene, and has been swiftly followed by a government-sponsored rival.

KelKel (Path to Revival) was founded in mid-January following protests earlier in the month in support of Atajurt co-head Roza Otunbaeva. She was forbidden to run for Atajurt in the election because, as a former ambassador, she had not met Kyrgyz residence rules applying to candidates.

KelKel already has more than 300 members, mainly from Bishkek universities, and describes itself as a civic campaign of non-violent resistance, founded to ensure free and honest elections. Though KelKel is a new organisation, it has grown out of numerous youth-oriented non-governmental organisations, NGOs that existed before.

"We call on everyone to stand up in defence of their electoral and civil rights. Not by destroying, but by creating. Together we will make the elections fair. Elections are the personal business of everyone. We make our protest peacefully. Protesting does not mean fighting," reads KelKel's campaign manifesto.

Chinara Aitbaeva, a member of the organising committee, said groups like KelKel are needed to shield students from the government practice of applying pressure, through teachers and school and university heads, to force pupils to vote for regime candidates.

"We want to inform young people about violations of their rights and to protect them," said Aitbaeva.

Bishkek university student Timur Saikhutdinov has been threatened with expulsion since joining KelKel but is undeterred. "I'm not afraid, and I want other students to stop being afraid as well, and start fighting for their right to a free choice," he told IWPR.

Though organisers insist they have no political affiliations, many KelKel members demonstrated in support of Otunbaeva at protests on January 15 and 17, handing out lemons - the KelKel movement's symbol.

"We do not have anything to do with Otunbaeva's party. But she was the spark that set off our enthusiasm and desire to fight together for our rights," said Kazbek, another member of the organising committee.

"But there is no underlying political motive, we simply gave out lemons so that people wouldn't get sick after the protests in the cold."

The Kyrgyz government has been quick to respond to the potential threat, and in an attempt to diffuse its impact, has formed a rival youth movement, confusingly also called KelKel.

It has been distributing pamphlets, holding press conference and briefings in defence of the ruling regime.

Not surprisingly, the pro-government KelKel - which also uses the lemon symbol - is rather different than its predecessor. It has spoken out against "velvet revolutions", "irresponsible calls for civil disobedience" and "hysterical pickets" that damage the country's stability.

In the spirit of cooperation, the original KelKel has approached its usurper about working together, but to no avail. It is now considering legal action over the use of its logos and symbols by a rival.

Alisher Mamasaliev, an organiser with the original KelKel, said, "You have to recognise the skill of the political spin doctors who came up with the idea of cloning our organisation [make a group] representing the interests of the regime. We are not an opposition, that anyone should fear us. Our strategy is outside any parties - we simply want to inform young people of their rights to an honest choice."

Observers say the emergence of rival KelKels is an attempt by the opposition and government to draw Kyrgyz youth into their political battles.

"It is clear that KelKel's policies are no different from the politics of the opposition party Atajurt. And the clone organisation defends the interests of the regime," said Elmira Nogoibaeva, a political scientist, adding the public is now confused about which organisation is real.

Ermek Kozubekov, also a political scientist, agrees that young people are being used by the ruling regime and its rivals. Kozubekov believes the sudden interest by Kyrgyzstan's youth in the political process will fade soon after the elections.

"The abilities of young people are being used by both sides. Although I am sure that all the activity of young people will drop to zero after the elections," said Kozubekov.

"No one is really counting on young people. They do not have real power. This is just an additional factor to gain the attention of the public. They are needed to cause a stir."

However, some experts believe that the "awakening" of young people has nothing to do with the impending elections and is instead a real beginning of a political movement for the country's young people, sparked by the difficult conditions they face in Kyrgyzstan.

"This has happened because young people today do not receive any social support, and the state has no protectionist policy towards young people," said Toktogul Kachkeev, a political scientist and member of the Central Asian Crisis Management Group, a think-tank.

"They are not given scholarships, living conditions in dormitories are not provided for, and they are not ensured vacant positions after their studies are over. Young people are not seen as the potential future of the country. Realising that no one pays attention to them, young people have decided that they will not be a toy in the hands of politicians.

"All over the world, young people have become a real force, and our students see this and follow this example, representing and protecting their interests."

The leader of the Coalition for Democratic Civil Society, Edil Baisalov, praised the young members of his group as the most principled and competent people there.

He believes the young see right through transparent attempts by older politicians to use the youth movement for their own purposes.

“However the regime or the opposition tries to use them for their own goals, young people will still be five steps ahead of everyone else. The opposition treats us young people like the former Komsomol, and the regime only tries to use us to strengthen their position. But I don’t think they will be successful.”

Gulnura Toralieva is an IWPR correspondent in Bishkek.

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