

Kyrgyz Poverty Protests

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Bishkek attempts to stifle protests over plunging living standards

The Kyrgyz government is trying to block a swelling tide of protest from its poverty-stricken citizens. This spring, small opposition groups launched a number of street rallies against the suppression of freedom, human rights violations and steep rises in the cost of food, electricity, gas and water.

Of all the countries which left the Soviet Union in 1991 only Tajikistan is poorer. According to United Nations estimates, three million or 68 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's 4.5 million inhabitants live below the poverty line.

Minister of Labour and Social Security, Roza Aknazarova, has talked of the threat of a "social explosion" should the situation worsen. Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev is similarly downbeat.

"No matter how shameful it is to admit this, we have reached the bottom with only Tajikistan poorer than we are," he said.

But admissions are one thing, permitting people to protest another. So, the authorities, well aware that protests were being planned took pre-emptive action, especially in view of a number of demonstrations due to take place on May Day, May 1.

School heads and company managers were instructed to lecture students and workers on the possible dire consequences should they join the rallies.

Bishkek's municipal bye-laws were also called into play. These state that demonstrations should be confined to a remote area around the Maxim Gorky monument. City authorities say this rule is aimed only at preserving order and keeping the city clean.

However, For Democracy and Civil Society leader Elfrida Yausheva, reckons that such curbs on freedom of association contradict the country's constitution.

"I have asked the Lenin district court to review the regulation banning demonstrations from most parts of the city," she said. "But the court is clearly dragging its feet hoping that dissatisfaction will fade away.

"This municipal regulation (which dates back to 1994) has never been registered with the justice ministry and is therefore unlawful. I believe that by bringing demonstrators before the courts the authorities have acted improperly."

The chief executive of the capital's Pervomaiski district, Nurlat Aitmurzaev, came up with further obstacles saying that public demonstrations in Bishkek are forbidden during holidays and weekends. This is why, he told IWPR, the rallies were banned on May Day.

To further dissuade people from taking to the streets, rumours were spread beforehand warning that clashes and bloodshed could erupt at the rallies. People were told the protesters were intent only on destabilising society.

Faced with such a formidable wall of official discouragement, only the most dedicated of protesters took to the streets in April and May.

In the event, around 1,000 people came out on the streets, most of them pensioners, unemployed or street traders. They were met by intensive scrutiny from waiting ranks of police. Loudspeaker cars used by demonstrators were hauled away and leading protesters marched off to jail.

"It has become dangerous to protest on the streets," said Jenish Edigeev, a journalist on the opposition newspaper Asaba. "Police can quietly whisk you away. I realise that my friends and relatives may suffer because of my participation.

If I am filmed by the National Security Service, I will go onto a blacklist. In spite of all this, I had to go to the rally, because there's no other way to protest".

One leading protester, Omurbek Tekebaev, wanted to stage a demonstration on the central Ala-Too square, near Government House. He was accused in the government newspaper Kyrgyzstan's Word of "seeking to bring dissent and destabilisation in society".

The paper carried a statement from a group headed by Sopubek Begaliev, parliamentary chairman, saying that "the holiday should not serve as a weapon by a handful of people for narrow selfish goals".

"It is time to stop distracting workers," it continued, "and to ban all rallies and pickets so that people may unite around the head of state Askar Akaev."

Tekebaev was among three opposition leaders who were fined 20 US dollars each by a Bishkek district court for taking part in the unsanctioned demonstrations.

Bishkek's interim prosecutor, Marat Koshoev, described May 1 as a "Red date" from a dead past. State secretary, Osmonakun Ibragimov, lamented that some people used the date to score political points. For his own contribution to May Day, Ibragimov took part in a 500 metre run.

In spite of all this, when May Day came about 500 protesters - pensioners, deputies and unemployed - donned red T-shirts and caps and gathered at the parliament building. "We wanted to hold our rally on the central square, in front of the Lenin monument," said Omurbek Tekebaev. "But city officials were one step ahead and blocked our way with formations of police."

The authorities organised distractions to lure away would-be demonstrators: street sales of low-priced food near all city monuments, outdoor concerts and races. Even military choirs and pop groups were drafted in to perform at those places believed to have been marked out by demonstrators.

More muscle was shown elsewhere. Machine-gun toting guards prevented people getting through to the Lenin monument and opposition members were forced out of Ala-Too square.

Alexander Kutsev, Ar-Namys opposition member turned up despite serving prison sentences for attending previous demonstrations nonetheless waving a banner proclaiming "God's Will - Akaev's Resignation"

Ar-Namys party chairman, Emil Aliev, reckons that as more and more poverty-stricken people vent their rage in public the authorities will become increasingly frightened and hand out stricter sentences.

"We have no option but to rebel," said the leader of the Kyrgyzstan Communist Party, Professor Clara Ajibekova. "We go for extreme measures because we cannot express our dissatisfaction through the press. We are left with only one option, revolution!"

Some analysts believe that by intimidating the opposition, the authorities may unwittingly remind Kyrgyz citizens of Stalinist rule. One political scientist who declined to be named said, "The authorities are incapable of improving the situation, people are sick of empty promises. If a respected leader is found the country is ripe for revolution..."

But little Kyrgyzstan, so desperately poor, can hardly afford such luxuries as a revolution.

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