

Kyrgyz President Issues Warning to Legislators

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After parliamentary criticism prompts most of his government offer to resign, President Kurmanbek Bakiev tells legislators to behave or face the consequences.

A rift between parliament and government in Kyrgyzstan culminated this week in an offer of resignation by most of the cabinet.

Since President Kurmanbek Bakiev moved with alacrity to turn down the resignation offer made by 14 of his ministers, most observers judged it to be no more than a move in the complex game in which multiple players are vying for power. The principal actors are the president and his entourage, Prime Minister Felix Kulov, various factions within parliament, and pressure groups outside the formal authorities.

Some analysts think the resignation was staged to allow Bakiev to threaten an unruly parliament with dissolution, and also to fend off mounting criticism of his rule, expressed most recently at a rally of thousands of people.

The crisis began on April 28 after the prime minister delivered a report to parliament on the achievements of his government to date. Kulov, a powerful politician from the north of Kyrgyzstan, became prime minister as part of an election pact which allowed the southerner Bakiev to become president last July. Their relationship, known as the "tandem", has not always been easy, but is central to the current balance of executive power.

The assembled deputies gave the report an overall positive appraisal – but the mood turned sour when they then voted to assess each minister's performance individually.

Only Kulov, two ministers, and the head of a state committee got the thumbs up at the end of this process.

The infuriated ministers wanted to hand in their notice before the day was out, but they decided to wait until a major opposition rally scheduled for the following day was out of the way.

On May 2, Deputy Prime Minister Adakhan Madumarov, 11 other ministers, the head of a state committee, and the chief of the prime minister's office, signed a joint letter of resignation, blaming parliament for instigating the one-by-one assessment.

"The actions taken by parliament clearly create insurmountable differences between the Jogorku Kenesh [Supreme Council or parliament] and the government," their letter read.

The letter went on to say how much the cabinet had tried to sort out the many problems that Kyrgyzstan has faced since the March 2005 revolution which brought the Bakiev administration to power.

"At a very difficult time for our state ... a great deal was done," said the ministers. "Most of our time was taken up with endless rallies, pickets and demonstrations expressing various demands made by the public, relating to unresolved problems which built up the 14 years of rule by the previous regime."

The word on the grapevine was that Kulov was also considering handing in his resignation, but that other ministers asked him to stay on.

Bakiev immediately met with the ministers who signed the letter and announced that he would not accept their resignations.

Instead, he made it quite clear that he held parliament at fault for the clash and hinted that he might dissolve it.

The current legislature was elected last spring in two rounds of voting so palpably flawed that they sparked mass protests which eventually coalesced into the March revolution and drove President Askar Akaev and his team from power. Parliament's subsequent relationship with Bakiev's administration has not been an easy one.

"If insurmountable differences arise between parliament and the executive, I will be forced to make use of my constitutional right to take fundamental measures towards parliament."

Kulov was more poker-faced about the outcome. "This really was an amicable decision, yet it was not unexpected. The ministers said they were prepared to resign so that no one could accuse them of clinging onto office. They simply considered it their duty to defend their professional honour," he told reporters.

"No hasty conclusions should be drawn about whether their decision was rash or justifiable, and no one should [use it to] set parliament against government."

Parliament has yet to respond formally to Bakiev's move, but already many of its members are describing it as a slap in the face which shows how much the president wants to dissolve the current legislature and call fresh elections

Deputy Melis Eshimkanov believes the whole sequence of events was a sham.

"It was an pre-arranged performance by deputies who support Bakiev. They initiated it, and they insisted on examining the work of each minister. The offence that the government took at parliament is not terribly genuine," Eshimkanov told IWPR. "Lying behind all this, there's simply an attempt to scare deputies with the possible dissolution of parliament."

Political analyst Alexander Knyazev takes the same view, saying, "Judging by the amicable, immediate reaction from the president and prime minister, this is a game whose real aim is to give Bakiev an excuse to threaten to dissolve parliament."

Both Knyazev and Eshimkanov believe the resignations followed by Bakiev's refusal to accept them were a direct response to an anti-government protest rally held in central Bishkek on April 29.

“There is a direct link with the rally,” said Eshimkanov, one of the organisers of the protest meeting. “Bakiev’s team saw the power of the opposition, which has a great deal of public support. They decided to use this tactic to fight the opposition. But it looks rather stupid; the experiment was not a success.”

The rally, which drew an estimated 10,000 people despite the rainy day, was organised by the Movement for Reforms, an umbrella group of political parties set up only a month earlier. This group’s membership overlaps with the People’s Coalition of Democratic Forces, set up in January by political parties dissatisfied with the progress made by Bakiev’s administration.

Such groupings of political forces represent the “new opposition” in Kyrgyzstan – former allies of Bakiev in the anti-Akaev opposition who feel he has failed to live up to the hopes that inspired the March revolution.

The rally ended with an ultimatum for the administration to implement Bakiev’s election promises, and calls to re-start the stalled constitutional reform process, to push through judicial and police reforms, and to wage war on corruption and especially organised crime.

If these demands are not met, the Movement for Reforms says it will hold another mass rally on May 27, and this time it will seek the resignation of both president and prime minister.

Almazbek Atambaev, a former trade and industry minister who now heads the Social Democratic Party and who was a prime mover behind the new movement, set the tone in the first speech to the assembled protesters, “We have come to this rally to make sure that our President Bakiev does not turn into an Akaev. Nothing has changed in the year since the revolution.... the same thieves are getting rich from the regime, and one gets the impression that the same old Akaev is still in Government House running the country.

“We did not make the March revolution... so that a different set of bloodsuckers could feed off the people.”

The prevalence of organised crime, which has become much more visible since last March, came up again and again in subsequent speeches.

“We understand that it’s impossible to make fundamental changes to life within the space of one year - but it is possible to create hope,” said Union of Democratic Forces leader Kubatbek Baibolov. “Yet this regime has trampled on people’s hopes. The war on corruption is just a pretence. We are against criminals and corrupt people influencing the regime and running the country.”

As protestors chanted calls for Bakiev and Kulov to come out from Government House onto the square, the two men appeared and made brief speeches to the crowd. As Bakiev said “I well understand your demands. I have never run from my people.... Those who say nothing is being done are blind,” he was prevented from continuing by whistling and shouting from protestors.

Afterwards, rally organisers were triumphant, saying they had definitely got their message across.

But Tolekan Ismailova, leader of Civil Society Against Corruption group, sounded a note of caution, “Now is not the time for such large-scale rallies, demonstrations and confrontation, but a time to consolidate

political forces, develop things and solve problems.”

She praised Bakiev and Kulov for making an appearance, saying, “The fact that both members of the tandem came out to the protestors is a positive aspect. Unlike under the previous regime, which was practically deaf and blind, this provides an opportunity for further dialogue and problem solving.”

Tursunbek Akunov, who chairs the presidential committee for human rights, also saw signs of compromise.

“The rally made a positive impression, it is a major achievement for democracy and human rights, and it represents a new form of communication with the regime,” he told IWPR. “The rally will have a positive effect on the regime, and we will draw the right conclusions....We must develop a new culture of communication between the opposition and the regime.”

But subsequent events suggested that Bakiev may seek to outflank, rather than compromise, with his opponents inside and outside parliament. The previous week he had given orders for a new law to be drafted to delineate the rights and functioning of the political opposition.

Bakiev’s not-so-hidden threat to dissolve parliament indicated that he planned to engage with the opposition on his terms, not theirs.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a civil servant working in government told IWPR, “This has been a well-orchestrated move designed to improve the government’s image. Furthermore, it was another excuse to show the troublesome parliamentarians who’s boss in Kyrgyzstan.”

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