

Kyrgyz Voter Clash Prompts Election Debate

Author: [IWPR Central Asia](#)

Armed with shotguns and ready for a fight, voters turn out in force to support their local candidates. The running battles that accompanied a by-election in southern Kyrgyzstan this week have raised questions about the way ballots are run, with some commentators saying the system should change while others argue that voters have a poor grasp of democratic principles.

The ballot was held in the Kurshab constituency on June 25 after Kyrgyzstan's Supreme Court declared the results of a May 19 by-election null and void, citing inaccurate voter lists and outright fraud at several polling stations.

The earlier vote had been a close-run affair, with Mamat Orozbaev winning with just under 50 per cent of the vote and his rival Sanjar Kadyraliev only fractionally behind.

Orozbaev was sworn in as a member of Kyrgyzstan's single chamber parliament before the Supreme Court overturned the results, and the two men were forced to square off again in the re-run.

The flashpoint for the trouble was a polling station in Jalpaktash. Several days before the vote, village residents, who included many of Orozbaev's relatives, tried to block the access road to stop Kadyraliev's people getting in.

The authorities smelled trouble, and deployed 150 riot police to safeguard the ballot. The night before the vote, police in Jalpaktash found a car belonging to one of the campaign teams with its windows smashed in.

By the time polling booths opened, the two camps were in combative mood and apparently armed to match.

Groups of rival supporters, some on horseback, gathered and began hurling stones at each other.

When shots were fired and the situation threatened to get out of hand, the police used tear gas and moved in. Such was the determination of the rival groups to clash with each other that police had to step in 15 times to separate them.

"They'd armed themselves with sticks and bars," policeman Urayim Tashiev said later. "We also confiscated gas pistols and two 12-bore shotguns from them."

Eventually the election authorities had to call a halt to the vote after about 200 people had been to the polls.

The final tally was 17 people in hospital, two of them with gunshot wounds. Seven policemen were also

injured.

The Osh regional police department, which includes Jalpaktash, has promised to charge all those responsible for the violence.

The two camps blamed each other for starting the trouble. "The conflict began when we started putting up a yurt [Kyrgyz tent]. The other lot beat up our guys. They even threatened the head of the village council," said a pro-Orozbaev villager who did not want to be named.

Kadyraliev's election manager Kanybek Tynystanov told IWPR, "Orozbaev's supporters started shooting first. The day before the vote, they were walking around with pistols and intimidating us. We took a pistol off one of them and handed it over to the police."

At the time this report was published, the situation in Jalpaktash was still on a knife-edge.

"Things are still tense in the village.... At any moment, the two sides are prepared to attack each other with stones," said Erkinbek Sydygaliev, a supporter of Kadyraliev.

A local resident who did not want to be named said, "There's a grave situation in this constituency. People have divided up according to clan and they're ready to kill each other.... Neither candidate should be allowed into parliament. Unless the election is postponed until next year, there may be bloodshed among residents."

The unseemly scenes have led some observers to question whether there are underlying flaws in the electoral system, or whether Kyrgyzstan's voters are too poorly educated to participate in the democratic process.

Khait Aykynov, an election monitor who witnessed events as they unfolded, said the street violence was a product of flawed election practices both in the May by-election and in the re-run.

"The local electoral commissions, the Central Election Commission, and the judicial bodies did not deal with legal violations in timely fashion. They underestimated the issue, and that's what has caused all this," said Aykynov. "Voters are saying people who were long dead were still listed on the electoral rolls, and some people also used others' passports [as ID] to vote."

The governor of Osh region, Jantoro Satybaldiev, also blamed the electoral authorities and the courts for creating a vacuum in which both candidates called out friends and family to support their respective cases.

"The Central Election Commission, the district court and the Supreme Court should have done their work properly and punctiliously. They dumped it all on the voters, where were already divided and quarrelling," he said.

Some argue that the first-past-the-post system now in use in Kyrgyzstan should be abandoned in favour of proportional representation, which makes elections less of a direct competition and thus is less likely to

create antagonism.

Topchubek Turgunaliyev, leader of the Erkindik party, believes that the adversarial election meant that “a group of people living in the same village became enemies, and bloodshed ensued”.

“This [violence] is a sign that we haven’t yet rid ourselves of the legacy of [former president Askar] Akaev. Unless we move over to elections by party list, it will lead to national tragedy,” he said.

Aziza Abdrasulova of the Kylym Shamy human rights group sees the election violence as a reflection of the turbulence which has been a feature of the period since the March revolution, with large and small protests taking place across the country to press a variety of social and political demands.

“The idea has appeared in this society that any problem can be solved through the use of force. So these people decided to win the parliamentary seat by force,” said Abdrasulova.

Sazykbay Turdumaliyev, the head of the Archa party, took an even more pessimistic view of voters’ maturity, saying, “Elections have turned into a public spectacle for voters. Once they’ve been given a drink and some cash by all the candidates involved, they’re up for anything. It shows there’s no culture of election participation.”

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