

Kyrgyzstan: Democracy's Reluctant Volunteers

Author: [Jalil Saparov](#)

Teachers complain of being roped in to work as election managers, and in some cases to help political candidates' campaigns.

For the first time, teachers in Kyrgyzstan have formally expressed anger at being used as unpaid election officers by the authorities. Some also allege that they are forced to work as political campaigners for candidates.

Teachers' groups have written to the Central Election Commission, CEC, asking the government to stop relying on teachers to serve as election workers at polling stations.

This followed a similar appeal by teachers from all regions of the republic to education minister Mustafa Kidibaev and the head of parliament's education committee, Jangoroz Kanimetov.

The issue is becoming urgent, as parliamentary and presidential elections are scheduled for February and October 2005, respectively.

As in other countries, schools are often turned into polling stations on election day. But instead of volunteering to help run the ballot, teachers are simply press-ganged into the work. The practice is a hold-over from the Soviet period, when elections were a meaningless charade staged by the state and government employees were roped into help as "volunteers".

History teacher Bakhtiyar Tursunbai Uulu told IWPR that low salaries and fear of dismissal put teaching staff in an especially vulnerable position when the authorities assign them to election work.

"According to the old electoral code, headmasters are appointed as heads of constituency election commissions, and some teachers are always co-opted to the commission," he said. "Since they are [viewed as] the obedient servants of their superiors, they're not supposed to have opinions of their own."

Teachers interviewed by IWPR said that they are placed under pressure by the headmaster after he in turn has been pressured by the head of the local education department, who has received orders from a regional boss desperate to fulfil the government's wishes.

Packing local election commissions with government employees is also in breach of election legislation, which requires a greater mix of members.

"At the October 10 [local] elections at the Jalalabad commercial institute, more than half the members of the district electoral commission were teachers or other state employees," said Tursunbai Uulu. "No one observed the law on the representation of other organisations in the district commissions. And the teachers themselves were terrified - they know what the consequences of disobeying would be."

People familiar with the education sector say such stories are all too familiar.

Chyrmash Dooronov, former head of the Jalalabad city education department, told IWPR that the authorities are happy to use teachers as free labour.

“Teachers are exploited to the full in parliamentary and presidential elections and in referendums,” said Dooronov, who no longer works for the state. “They are used as clerks, campaigners and distributors of various advertising materials, and have to spend most of their working time at polling stations.”

Jalalabad human rights activist Abdunazar Mamatislamov says that as well as being assigned to non-partisan election management, some teachers are made to work on the election campaigns of pro-government political candidates, in contravention of legislation which bans state employees from doing so.

“Under the Soviets, everyone worked for free, against their own will and interests,” he told IWPR. “Today our teachers are still being coerced to do the same thing. They are forced to campaign for the candidate put forward by the authorities, and don’t receive a penny for their efforts.”

Mamatislamov reflects that very little has changed since the Soviet period beyond the substitution of the word “democratic” for “communist”.

A mathematics teacher at a school in the capital Bishkek, who gave her name only as Lidia, told IWPR that she had recently been forced to work for one of the candidates in the recent council elections.

“Our headmaster was given a television for the school by a particular candidate – but we teachers had to pay for the gift by working for nothing at the election,” she said. “This happened in our own time in the evenings and also during school hours. We walked the streets handing out leaflets for the candidate and buttonholing passers-by.

She added, “It was so humiliating to go round the homes of our pupils and campaign to their parents. I could see the indignation on their faces. I feel as though I have compromised my principles.”

Lawyer Azat Tolonov said the legislation is perfectly clear on the matter, “According to the law on elections, it is not permitted to coerce citizens to take part in elections or to influence their vote. And if you have been forced to take part in campaigning, then you have the right to go to court.”

Officials deny that teachers are ever used for partisan work.

“Teachers do not take part in campaigning, they just organise the conduct of the election itself,” CEC head Sulaiman Imanbaev told the media.

The head of the education ministry’s administrative section, Chynybek Ajibekov, also rejected the charge, saying, “We have received a statement from schoolteachers in the Talas, Naryn and Osh regions in which they assert that they were forced to take part in campaigning. But that’s not the case.

“They did campaigning in Soviet times, but now no one forces them to. As educated people who carry some authority, teachers simply carry out educational work about the elections, and this does not interfere with their main job.”

Yrysbek Omurzakov, editor-in-chief of the human rights newspaper Tribuna, described the teachers' actions as a positive step.

"It is about time that teachers refuse to be an unpaid workforce at election time. They have put up with it for too long and have finally dared to tell the authorities, 'Respect us, we too have rights that we intend to protect!'"

Gulnura Toralieva is an IWPR contributor in Bishkek. Jalil Saparov and Alla Pyatibratova are an independent journalists in Jalalabad and Osh.

Location: Kyrgyzstan

Focus: Central Asia

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyzstan-democracys-reluctant-volunteers>