

Kyrgyzstan: Dialogue Breakthrough

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Government, opposition and civil society leaders come together in a new initiative aimed at defusing the growing political crisis.

For the first time since the bloody Aksy protests in March this year government and opposition politicians and representatives from civil society organisations have met face to face to discuss ways of resolving the mounting crisis in the country.

The Forum of Kyrgyz Leaders - organised by IWPR and the Civil Society Against Corruption NGO, and sponsored by a number of international organisations - met in Bishkek on July 13.

Although many speakers called for change, radical demands for the immediate resignation of president Askar Akaev were broadly dismissed, as most of participants believed that the move would be counterproductive and lead to a greater instability.

That too much power is concentrated in the office of president, however, was agreed on by most present. Several participants urged the head of state to delegate some of his executive, legislative and judicial controls to other branches of government, such as parliament.

The forum offered a rare opportunity for a diverse spectrum of political forces to meet and exchange views. Held under the motto, "Dialogue for the sake of the future", it issued a resolution calling on all political players and citizens to join forces in reinventing the Kyrgyz state and society.

The gathering follows months of anti-government demonstrations, initially prompted by the imprisonment of popular opposition deputy Azimbek Beknazarov and former presidential candidate Felix Kulov. Since the violent suppression of the pro-Beknazarov rally in Aksy on March 17, which left six people dead, demonstrations and protests have continued unabated.

Neither Beknazarov's subsequent release, nor a government reshuffle which saw some key government figures sacked, have pacified the protesters and opposition groups. Demands have grown for Akaev's resignation and early elections. Demonstrators in Aksy have announced plans to march on Bishkek in the autumn.

Concern that the standoff between the authorities and the dissenters could spin out of control and result in further tragedies like that at Aksy, prompted the civil society groups to arrange the forum in the hope of kick-starting dialogue.

"Civil leaders must take immediate action to set the wheels in motion for political dialogue and consensus between all the parties concerned," said Chinara Jakapova, IWPR director in Kyrgyzstan and one of the organisers of the gathering.

Consensus between all parties was, however, hard to come by. Government representatives were rather muddled, while some radical opposition parties refused to attend.

Kyrgyz foreign minister Askar Aitmatov offered an official welcome to the forum on behalf of the

government but went on to say that the authorities were planning their own round-table later in July entitled "Nationwide Dialogue: the Authorities and Society".

Topchubek Turgunaliyev, leader of the Erkindik (Freedom) opposition party said, "Our movement will ignore the forum. We will never sit at the same table as those government officials who, one way or another, are responsible for the Aksy tragedy."

Nevertheless, the event proved fruitful. Akaev's public relations advisor Bolot Januzakov praised the gathering's hosts for their efforts to strike-up a dialogue between political players.

Jakypova and fellow-organiser Tolekan Ismailova stressed the urgency of the situation, arguing that Kyrgyzstan was nearing the point of collapse.

"The massive protests and the government's ineptitude has thrown in doubt the nation's very sovereignty," said Jakypova.

Kyrgyzstan has 140 disputed border areas with Uzbekistan and 70 with Tajikistan. One high-level executive official was quoted, just after the upsurge in anti-government protests, as saying secret service agents from neighbouring states were intensifying activity inside Kyrgyzstan.

Adakhan Madumarov, a deputy from southern Kyrgyzstan, said the Uzbek community, which constitutes almost 20 per cent of the population in the south, is lobbying for Uzbek to become an official language there. Madumarov said he could not rule out the possibility that certain Uzbek-dominated areas may soon seek autonomy.

The word "crisis" featured frequently during the discussions, visibly rattling the government's representatives.

"The problem is," said parliamentary speaker Abdygany Erkebaev, "the government has long since departed from its initial commitment to democracy. To my mind, the government and the parliament are institutions whose mission is to cement national accord. They must be elected in an honest ballot."

Well-known opposition deputy Adakhan Madumarov lambasted the government for ignoring popular sentiment and violently suppressing all dissent. "The people and the government are separate entities speaking dissimilar languages," he said. "Senior officials are afraid of the truth."

"I find it ludicrous when president Akaev declares Kyrgyzstan 'the nation of human rights,'" said Oksana Malevanaya, a member of the parliamentary human rights committee. "This is a nation where human rights are despised."

But Malevanaya was equally critical of the radical opposition and their calls for the forcible removal of Akaev from office.

"Who can give a guarantee that any other leader after having been 'crowned' would willingly give away his powers in the name of a real victory of human rights?" she said.

Despite the diversity of views, most of those present were optimistic. The well-known businessman Omurbek Abdrakhmanov said that all that was needed was for the key players to meet each other half-way.

"This forum was a real milestone on the path towards dialogue," he said.

"This forum should become a permanent institution where everyone can share ideas and work out solutions," said one participant. Several others agreed that sessions should be held on a regular basis.

Media coverage commended the initiative shown by civil institutions in acting as mediators between the authorities, opposition parties and protesters.

"No one expected the forum to provide immediate solutions," wrote journalist Rina Prijivoit in the newspaper Moya stolitsa - Novosti, "What really matters is that it pinpointed the problem areas and paved the way for continued dialogue as the key to peace and accord in Kyrgyzstan."

Meanwhile, hard line opposition movements held their own gathering, a Kurultai (congress) of peoples, on July 18 in Kerben, the administrative centre of the Aksy district. Then there is the government round-table planned for late July.

Whether these events will follow in the footsteps of the forum and promote dialogue as the only precondition for national accord, remains to be seen.

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