

Kyrgyzstan: Embattled Akaev to Share Powers

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The increasingly unpopular president has agreed to relinquish some of his authority to parliament, but his opponents are still calling for his resignation.

Askar Akaev, Kyrgyzstan's increasingly unpopular president, has offered a series of concessions in what opponents see as a bid to divide his opponents and stave off calls for his resignation.

The Kyrgyz leader has agreed to share some of his powers with the parliament. His current powers are wide-ranging, including the power to appoint the judiciary and complete control over the forming and dissolving of administrations.

The president began to offer the surprise concessions in August, when he invited some of his sworn opponents to join him on an official visit to Malaysia. Akaev's unexpected travelling companions were Melis Eshimkanov, editor of the *Agym* newspaper, and Omurbek Tekebaev, a parliamentary deputy and leader of the socialist party *Ata Meken* (Fatherland). These two young politicians competed with Akaev for the post of president in the 2000 elections and were heavily criticised in government newspapers.

Eshimkanov told journalists that during the visit to Malaysia they held detailed talks with the president and convinced him serious constitutional reform was necessary, starting with restrictions to his authority.

The president seems to have taken their advice upon his return to Bishkek, holding his first serious meeting with opposition representatives, including Emil Aliev of the *Ar-Namys* party, which is led by the jailed Felix Kulov, and Adakhan Madumarov of the parliamentary group *Kyrgyzstan*, as well as Tekebaev and Eshimkanov.

The two sides discussed political reforms, human rights and relations between the government and opposition. The plight of Felix Kulov, sentenced to ten years imprisonment in May of this year, was also discussed. Aliev commented after their meeting that the president appeared "interested in a positive conclusion to this affair".

In what has been described as a frank discussion with Akaev, Madumarov spoke openly of the danger of the current situation, saying Akaev's government has lost the trust of most people, who bitterly resented official corruption at a time when most of them lived below the poverty line.

The deputy told IWPR that he had bluntly informed the Kyrgyz leader that 80 per cent of the population wanted him to go. "Akaev has to realise he has reached his limit as a president and should go for early elections," he said.

Tekebaev said Akaev had expressed his willingness to cooperate closely with all political forces for the good the country and had agreed to transfer part of his authority to parliament and the government.

Two referenda in Kyrgyzstan in 1994 and 1996 granted almost limitless executive authority to the president. The opposition blames most of the country's problems on these powers, accusing Akaev of authoritarianism, trampling on human rights and persecuting the opposition.

A brewing political crisis culminated in mass protests in the southern town of Aksy in March, in which the police shot dead several civilians, triggering further demonstrations across the country. Another march, planned for September, will travel from the provinces to Bishkek and is expected to lead to more calls for Akaev to go.

However, not all opposition leaders are pressing for such radical change. Eshimkanov told IWPR that he no longer supported the idea of Akaev's immediate resignation and the snap elections that would follow. "Radical changes are very dangerous for the future of our country, which has found itself on the brink of disaster," he said.

Tekebaev said Akaev should complete his constitutional term of office, which is due to finish at the end of 2005, "for the sake of preserving the statehood of Kyrgyzstan".

Most opposition parties are in a more militant frame of mind, however, and want Akaev to go as soon as possible. They have set up a movement to this effect, called "For the resignation of Akaev and reforms for people," under the army general and parliamentary deputy Ismail Isakov, who is known for his uncompromising stance.

As the name of the organisation indicates, this group wants Akaev's immediate resignation. "If the government does not meet these demands, mass protests will begin again all over the country in autumn," the movement's leaders announced. They said fundamental reform to the political system could only follow after the president was gone.

Ramazan Dyryldaev, head of the Kyrgyz committee for human rights and a member of the movement, said Akaev's latest concessions were a desperate attempt to save his career and hang on to his authority.

"Akaev and his team have discredited themselves to such an extent that no one takes their actions seriously anymore," he said. "Only the immediate and unconditional resignation of the president will save this country from catastrophe."

Dyryldaev said cautious warnings about "destabilising" the situation did not stand up. "Only when the people of Kyrgyzstan have a new leadership will there be new hope for the future," he said.

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