

Kyrgyzstan: Government Stages Public Rallies

Author: [Sultan Jumagulov](#)

The Kyrgyz authorities have staged a series of meetings in support of President Askar Akaev in a bid to counter a wave of anti-government protests.

Kyrgyzstan has been swept by a tide of government-sponsored rallies in support of beleaguered President Askar Akaev.

One such rally was attended by between 8,000 and 15,000 people in Bishkek on August 22. The event was initiated by the local administration, which has the power to grant or deny permission for mass protests in the city centre.

However, the country's increasingly vocal opposition has dismissed the events, claiming the majority of people who attended were government officials, public sector employees and pensioners. "The rally was engineered by the government and there were many plainclothes police among the participants," claimed the independent newspaper *Moya Stolitsa - Novosti*.

The rally was organised by Pervomaisky district administration head Tokon Shailieva - a leader of the Democratic Women's Party of Kyrgyzstan - and featured scheduled speakers expressing their support for Akaev. They also lashed out against opposition leaders, accusing them of inciting strife in society in order to seize power.

The same sentiment prevailed at the pro-government rallies in Osh, the administrative centre of southern Kyrgyzstan, and Sokuluk near Bishkek. The protesters also called for the term of Akaev's presidency to be extended from five years to seven.

These events were organised immediately after a group of opposition leaders reiterated their intention to press for Akaev's resignation.

On August 14, a group of leading opposition figures spearheaded by Ismail Isakov, army general and chairman of the parliamentary security committee, announced the establishment of a movement named For Akaev's Resignation and Reforms for the People, claiming that the president's administration had no right to remain in power after the police shot and killed six protesters in the Aksy municipality on March 18.

Following the bloodshed, Aksy became the scene of a fierce standoff between the government and its opponents after the authorities ignored calls to punish the killers. Protests were held across the entire Jalal-Abad region for three months.

Further demonstrations are planned for September 17. "Since the authorities have no respect for public opinion or the law, the disgruntled population has no choice but to press for the enforcement of its demands," read a resolution passed at the People's Kurultai (Council) Assembly in Aksy on July 18.

Analysts speculate that the country could be hit by a new wave of civil unrest involving an increasing number of regions and citizens. This, they warn, is bound to happen once the opposition strikes back.

Well-known opposition journalist Alym Toktomushev describes the pro-authority rallies as reckless as well as futile, and believes they will result in further disturbances.

"In a desperate attempt to hold on to power, the government has consciously decided to set its citizens against each other. This is not a statesmanlike way to settle internal conflicts," said Toktomushev.

Participants of pro-government rallies argue that they had to take to the streets to prevent others from using the Aksy tragedy as an excuse to whip up civil disobedience and eventually depose a legitimately elected head of state.

Shailieva told IWPR that the founders of the movement for Akaev's resignation had no right to speak on behalf of all citizens of Kyrgyzstan.

"Akaev enjoyed the support of 75 per cent of the population in 2000. Of course a percentage of Kyrgyz may be unhappy with his policies, but that's no reason to demand his early resignation," she said, dismissing the accusation that the government had forced the rally participants to attend.

Those opposition leaders who watched the pro-government rallies in the capital and elsewhere are confident that the events attracted very low popular support.

The demonstrations played into the hands of the opposition, they claim, since the authorities now have no choice but to allow other groups to hold protests in the city centre.

Adakhan Madumarov, a prominent opposition deputy and member of the movement for Akaev's resignation, recently came back from the south of Kyrgyzstan, where he claims to have the support of 90 per cent of the region's people.

"Common people will not fight each other unless the government incites them, but our peaceful protest marches in autumn will be nationwide in scale."

Dilbar Momunkulova, an Aksy human rights activist, told IWPR the bereaved families and their sympathisers in the Jalal-Abad region are enraged by the government's apparent attempt to pit the area against the rest of the nation. "Common Kyrgyz are with us," she said.

"All we wanted was the punishment of those who killed our six countrymen, but the authorities ignored us. The general opinion is that the government is at fault, and we want to hold it accountable. The Aksy people are firm and no threats or pro-Akaev rallies will stop them."

Sultan Jumagulov is a BBC stringer in Bishkek.

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