

Kyrgyzstan Isolated Over Kulov Trial

Author: [Almaz Kenenbaev](#)

Kyrgyzstan faces increasing international isolation as the government of President Askar Akaev pushes ahead with the criminal prosecution of his main political rival.

The controversial trial of opposition leader and presidential hopeful, Felix Kulov, finally got underway in Bishkek on June 27 before a closed military court. It coincided with the Kyrgyz electoral commission's long-awaited date for the next presidential elections - October 29, 2000.

Kulov said in an interview for the *Litsa* newspaper on the day of the trial that he believed the up-coming poll would be a "tough one" and that he would still run if acquitted.

He was arrested in March this year and charged with forgery and abusing his official powers while security minister in 1997-1998. His detention came amid protests over alleged electoral fraud during parliamentary polls the same month and only days after Kulov announced his intention to run for the presidency.

Kyrgyzstan, once renowned as Central Asia's "island of democracy", now faces international censure over what many observers see as the politically motivated prosecution of a serious presidential challenger.

The OSCE, which criticised the March elections as unfair, has already appealed on Kulov's behalf. As have the Russian State Duma and the United States government, all to no avail.

Back in April, United States Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, during an official visit to Bishkek, openly criticised the government over its treatment of Kulov.

"I said that it was very important that he [Kulov] be treated fairly and that it was a huge mistake to turn ones political opponents into people that are viewed in a criminal light," Albright said. "We will be watching this very closely. I am sure that President Akaev understood the strength of my views on this subject."

Kulov was, however, denied bail and in early June his trial was moved to a closed military court. Only lawyers and witnesses were allowed into the hearing. Kulov's wife was barred, as were observers from the OSCE and the International League for Human Rights, ILHR.

US attorney and president of the ILHR, Scott Horton, said the decision to hold the hearing in secret was a clear violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. "The charges reveal no conceivable basis for conducting a secret trial," Horton said.

Kyrgyzstan's depends heavily on the US for its grain supplies. National debt now consumes 40 per cent of the state budget. Foreign aid is directly linked to commitments to respect and encourage democracy and a liberal economy.

If Kyrgyzstan is deemed to have reneged on these commitments, Western countries may well refuse to postpone debt repayments, with disastrous consequences for the state budget.

The US has already demonstrated its disapproval by refusing Kyrgyz Foreign Minister, Murat Imanaliev, an invitation to the One World Democratic Forum. But Washington's interest in Kulov's fate is not confined to its implications for Kyrgyz democracy.

The US has viewed Kulov as an ally for a number of years. In October 1998, Kyrgyz security services intercepted and confiscated a trainload of illegal weapons they claimed were destined for the anti-Taleban Northern Alliance forces in Afghanistan.

The weapons shipment allegedly originated in Iran, a country branded for decades a pariah state by the US. The order to seize the cargo came from a close associate of Kulov's, the Osh region's security head Omurbek Subanaliev.

Kulov's links with this high-profile operation earned him the admiration of the US government and glowing reports in the local Kyrgyz media.

Faced with mounting US disapproval over the clampdown on political opponents, the Kyrgyz leadership has sought to nurture support from an alternative source - Russia. Bishkek recently announced, for example, that Russian would once again be recognised as an official language.

But the government of Russian President, Vladimir Putin, has shown no interest in becoming involved in Kyrgyzstan's internal affairs. Bishkek is not a big regional player in Central Asia. Moscow prefers to foster relations with Kyrgyzstan's larger and more powerful neighbour, Uzbekistan.

The Bishkek government, therefore, risks alienating the West when it is already clear there are few if any real alternatives. Without external aid, it has little chance of neutralising mounting public discontent over the country's deteriorating economic and political problems.

The prosecution of Kulov, especially before a closed military court, has so heightened public distrust of the government that dialogue now seems close to impossible. Increasingly isolated, Kyrgyzstan is entering a potentially explosive phase.

Almaz Kenenbaev is a regular IWPR contributor in Bishkek.

Location: [Central Asia](#)
[Uzbekistan](#)
[Turkmenistan](#)
[Tajikistan](#)
Focus: [Central Asia](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyzstan-isolated-over-kulov-trial>