

Kyrgyzstan: Migrants Squeezed Out of Election

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An electoral commission decree prevents Kyrgyz migrants voting outside the country in upcoming ballot.

Kyrgyz migrants are angry with the Bishkek authorities for effectively barring them from taking part in forthcoming parliamentary elections.

A January 29 decree by the central electoral commission dictates that all Kyrgyz abroad will be unable to vote in the February 27 ballot unless they return home - but the move is believed to be specifically targeting the tens of thousands of legal migrant workers outside the country.

Analysts believe that the authorities are reluctant to enable these migrants - a sizeable proportion of the estimated seven hundred thousand, mostly illegal, Kyrgyz labourers working in Russia, other Central Asian countries and Western Europe - to vote in their host countries because they aren't able to have any influence over them.

The authorities' inability to sway the migrant vote is thought to have long been a concern of theirs, but is particularly so now because this time around the electorate will be voting for 400 candidates - six competing for every parliamentary seat - rather than easier-to-control party lists, as in previous ballots.

Some in the opposition support the decree for similar reasons.

In past elections, the authorities would make provisions for Kyrgyz living and working abroad, setting up polling booths in consulates and embassies around the world.

But under the new decree, Kyrgyz outside the country will have to come home to vote. However, few will be able to do so because of work and study commitments and the prohibitive cost of returning.

Yrysbek Omurazkov, the editor of the human rights newspaper *Tribuna*, said, "The main breadwinners of Kyrgyzstan, who did not leave their country because they had a good life here, will not be able to influence the politics of their country in any way, as it is hard to imagine that they will return to Kyrgyzstan because of parliamentary elections."

The electoral commission ruling has enraged many of the thousands of Kyrgyz migrants who are legally registered overseas.

"Yes, I sell goods [abroad], but that does not mean that I am not a citizen of Kyrgyzstan. I don't believe that my vote can decide anything, but I still want to carry out my civic duty," said migrant Bilal Akhmatov.

Aida Askerova, who works in Sverdlovsk in Russia, said, "All normal people vote at consulates and embassies. I don't understand why I can't take part in deciding the future of my country. There are thousands of people living here just like me."

Svetlana Usenaliyeva, employed in Khanty-Mansiysk autonomous district of north-west Siberia, said, "If our

state provided us with work, we would stay at home instead of travelling abroad. We are here because of our hopeless situation, and it is wrong to deprive us of the right to vote.”

But political commentators, lawyers and rights activists are split over the electoral commission decree.

Bermet Egemberdieva, a young lawyer, said the move violates the electoral code, which stipulates that provision should be made for citizens living outside the country to take part in elections at home, “Diplomatic and consular offices of Kyrgyzstan are obliged to enable Kyrgyz citizens to exercise their constitutional right.”

Political scientist Nur Omarov agreed, “[The decree] simply infringes [migrants’] rights and restricts the potential of the electoral campaign itself. The number of migrants is large, and if they voted, they could have a real influence on the election results.”

But there are those who believe that the electoral commission ruling makes sense.

Shamaral Maichiev, a well-known lawyer, told IWPR, “If citizens want to exercise their rights then they should come back to Kyrgyzstan and vote at their place of registration. Technical resources do not allow for parliamentary elections to be organised outside the country.”

The leader of the NGO Coalition For Democracy and Civil Society, Edil Baisalov, was concerned that there would be little scrutiny of voting outside the country, providing an opportunity for those wanting to manipulate the ballot.

“Experience has shown that in polling booths organised abroad, serious violations to elections take place, so it would be better if they [migrants] didn’t vote,” he said.

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