

Kyrgyzstan: Rebels Without Common Cause

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Part of the opposition is forging a new alliance, but prospects for a broader anti-government coalition remain slim.

As a number of leading Kyrgyz parties plan a new campaign against the government, the absence of other groups from the coalition suggests the opposition is as fractured and disunited as ever.

Political observers say they have seen it all before – promises of a revival in political action that are marred by lack of cohesion between the various groups. They predict that the parties will remain divided by ambition and interest.

Although price rises, power-cuts and the impact of global financial crisis have created hardship and discontent in Kyrgyzstan, the opposition parties have been unusually quiet this year, in contrast to 2006 and early 2007 when massive street protests were almost commonplace.

On November 3, a loose coalition of ten political parties, 12 non-government organisations and several notable politicians made an attempt to rebuild the opposition – or part of it – as a potent force.

In a joint memorandum, they announced a concerted plan of action to tackle political and economic problems for which they hold the government of President Kurmanbek Bakiev responsible.

The document paints a picture of “catastrophic decline” in people’s living standards, and goes on to lay the blame squarely on the Bakiev administration and a flawed political system which, it says, has left ordinary people shut out of decision-making.

When it comes to a cure, the memorandum is less specific, simply prescribing a major overhaul of the system to ensure rule of law and a truly competitive electoral process. Details of a new opposition programme, entitled Road to Justice, are to be unveiled at a “kurultay”, a public assembly that the coalition has scheduled for November 29.

The group, which characterises itself as “the opposition and constructive forces”, includes major parties like Ata Meken, Ak Shumkar, Asaba and the Social Democrats – the latter the only political group represented in parliament apart from the governing Ak Jol.

Social Democrat leader Bakyt Beshimov was upbeat about the latest attempt at collaboration, arguing that in contrast to previous opposition actions, this one was not about getting the president to resign, but about transforming Kyrgyzstan from a presidential to a parliamentary system.

“This is the first time opposition forces have united in this format,” Beshimov told IWPR. “The nucleus of the alliance is formed by the Social Democratic Party and Ata-Meken – parties that have a wide support

base and are effectively national parties.”

However, there are some notable absences as well. The People’s Revolutionary Movement for the Resignation of President Bakiev, led by prominent politician Azimbek Beknazarov, is still pursuing its hard-line, maximalist agenda of removing the head of state. It refused to sign the memorandum and is planning to hold a kurultay of its own on November 18.

“In talking about constitutional reforms, they are effectively turning away from the political struggle,” Beknazarov told IWPR. “We, however, believe we should ask people what form of government they want. We have our own concept, including a specific demand for the leadership to resign, so I did not lend it [the opposition memorandum] my support.”

Meanwhile Felix Kulov, the former prime minister who became the most prominent and arguably most radical opposition leader of 2007, is now busy with a government job, heading up a department in charge of developing new power stations. Bakiev appointed him to the post in May 2008.

Jany Kyrgyzstan, which brings together political heavyweights both in and out of power, has no plans to team up with the opposition grouping, either. Traditionally supportive of the regime, the party appeared to veer towards a more combative stance in October with a statement condemning the government’s handling of economic problems. (See **Kyrgyz Political Elite Hit by Infighting**, RCA No. 552, 21-Oct-08.)

The opposition grouping’s agenda might be too weak for the Revolutionary Movement, but it is far too radical for Jany Kyrgyzstan. According to leading member Miroslav Niazov, “They are obsessed with a single idea – getting rid of the leadership. But at the moment, Kyrgyzstan does not need revolutionary shocks of this kind.”

As for the group’s broader aims, Niazov said it was too soon to shelve the current presidential-style system, even if Bakiev and his predecessor Askar Akaev – ousted after opposition protests in 2005 – had proved less than ideal as presidents.

“Yes, both presidents turned out to be not much good, but we are just not ready for a parliamentary republic; our parties have not yet matured,” he said.

Many observers of the political scene greeted the latest attempt to forge a united front with a jaded sense of resignation. Among representatives of the opposition and the ruling party as well as neutral commentators, the factionalised nature of the opposition parties, each with its own strong leader, was a recurring theme.

“The Kyrgyz opposition has tried to unite on numerous occasions, but it’s never amounted to anything,” said Kubatbek Baybolov, himself a leading member of the opposition. “My biggest disappointment with regard to the opposition movement is that everyone is out for personal gain and his own interests.”

Begaly Nargozuev, a member of parliament from the pro-Bakiev Ak Jol party, offered a similar diagnosis, "At the moment, no strong political party exists in Kyrgyzstan. There are leaders and there are groupings of like-minded people around them."

Political analyst Valentin Bogatyrev believes that the prospect of a presidential election might focus politicians' minds – but the next ballot is not until 2010, and even then he is sceptical that they will make common cause.

"Only the nomination of a single opposition candidate for the 2010 election can make the opposition forces unite. But unfortunately, until that happens it is very unlikely that the opposition will come together," Bogatyrev said in an interview to the Bishkek Press Club the day after the opposition memorandum came out.

"As we move closer to the presidential election, joining the crowd means a loss of face for certain opposition politicians."

The separate events planned by various opposition groups will serve as clear reminders of this lack of unity. To add to the Revolutionary Movement's assembly on November 18 and the main opposition grouping's kurultay at the end of the month, the Erkin Kyrgyzstan party last week announced plans to stage anti-government protests on December 16.

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