

## **Kyrgyzstan: Trial of Strength**

**Author:** [Alisher Saipov](#)

Opposition leaders hold out for high-level talks after thousands of protesters foil police attempt to wrest control of major southern cities.

After violent scenes in two major southern cities at the weekend, the Kyrgyz government appears to have withdrawn its police and instead called for negotiations.

At first light on March 20, special police units stormed regional government buildings in the cities of Osh and Jalalabad which were being held by opposition supporters. But by the following afternoon, thousands of people had recaptured the buildings and were in effective control of both cities.

As this report was published, opposition leaders were in little mood to talk to a government that had just ordered police to be used against them, and instead appeared to be insisting on direct negotiations with President Askar Akaev.

Over recent weeks, the protests grew out of countrywide demonstrations by supporters of candidates who felt they had been cheated of victory by alleged government manipulation of the recent parliamentary election, held in two rounds on February 27 and March 13.

But by last week, protests in the south of Kyrgyzstan, at least, had grown into something else: with opposition party leaders in attendance, crowds of thousands of people were calling on President Akaev to step down without waiting for the October presidential election.

Protesting crowds seized the regional government building in Osh on March 18, meeting little resistance from the security forces posted outside. The following day the opposition held a “kurultai”, or popular congress, similar to one that had been held in Jalalabad on March 15.

The Osh rally was attended by 15,000 to 20,000 people both from the city and surrounding areas, and elected an informal regional leadership. Anvar Artykov, a former member of parliament, was made head of a “people’s council” whose stated aim is Akaev’s resignation. Duyshen Chotonov, the deputy head of the Ata Meken party who lost his seat in the first round of voting, became regional coordinator of the People’s Unity Movement, a nationwide umbrella group set up after the recent election.

Two weeks earlier, similar protests in Jalalabad led to crowds taking control of the regional administration there.

Kyrgyz government officials had warned that they might act to restore order in both cities. However, what happened next took everyone by surprise.

Early on the morning of March 20, police units stormed the Osh building. Alybek Baitikov, the regional chief of police, said later that the operation involved a crack police unit sent from the capital Bishkek, and up to 150 soldiers from the interior ministry forces.

□  
Protesters in front of the Osh administration building with a torn picture of President Akaev

□  
Opposition supporters at Osh airport holding captured police riot shields  
*Photos by Vyacheslav Oseledko*

It was impossible to verify reports from demonstrators who said that members of the special police unit had told them they were from the neighbouring state of Kazakstan.

Human rights activist Aziza Abdrasulova, who witnessed the event, said that as the police entered the building, there were about 30 women on chairs just inside the entrance.

“The soldiers started beating them with batons, then they rushed inside, swept through the offices and forced everyone out. The sleepy picketers, the majority of whom were women and elderly, did not put up any resistance,” she told IWPR.

The lightning operation left 14 protesters in hospital and another 84 in police custody. Five law officers were also injured, one of them by a Molotov cocktail.

Simultaneously, the regional government building in Jalalabad was also stormed. In a similar early-morning operation, about 200 police rushed to the premises which contained about the same number of protesters, most of whom were asleep.

Eyewitnesses said police beat up some of those inside the building, who included women and elderly people. They then transported detainees in three trucks to local police stations.

But within three hours, large crowds of people started converging on the city centre. An IWPR contributor estimated the number at up to 40,000. They included many young men from the countryside, armed with sticks, shovels and stones.

At around 1 pm that day, the crowds reached Jalalabad’s main square and easily recaptured the regional government building.

They went on to attack the city police department, where regional governor Jusupbek Sharipov had established his temporary office for the past two weeks. They began by throwing stones and Molotov cocktails through the gates of the compound, and police responded by firing blank shots. Then the protesters got hold of a police bus and rammed the gates. At this point, the law officers surrendered.

Part of the police building caught fire and quickly burned down.

By the end of the day, the opposition had effectively seized control of the city, and had taken the airport so that police reinforcements could not be flown in.

According to eyewitness accounts, many of the protesters were beaten up by officers. The police also suffered casualties, but the picture remains confused and it is difficult to obtain accurate figures.

An interior ministry official, who asked to remain anonymous, told IWPR, “We don’t know for sure what happened, because some policemen switched to the opposition side and others fled the scene.”

Kurmanbek Bakiev, a leading figure in the opposition, told journalists that he had received no reports of fatalities, noting, “Twenty-three people have sought medical assistance in Jalalabad, including 10 military

servicemen. Seven civilians were hospitalised, two of them with gunshot wounds including one who was seriously injured. One woman was taken to hospital with gas poisoning.”

With Jalalabad firmly in opposition hands, Osh was next. The following day, March 21, a large column snaked towards the centre of the city often termed Kyrgyzstan’s “southern capital”.

Despite the high level of political tension, officials were at that moment in the main square, trying to host public celebrations of Nooruz, the springtime date for the traditional new year.

Suddenly the column - around 5,000 people - burst onto the square. Many had come armed with sticks, iron bars and Molotov cocktails, but in the event they recaptured the regional government building without a fight. The three rows of policemen ringing the premises simply melted away.

They went on to take control of the regional and city police departments and the National Security Service - all of which were deserted by the time they got there.

About 3,000 people assembled on the main square to be addressed by people’s council chairman Anvar Artykov, Atajurt movement co-leader Roza Otunbaeva and other opposition leaders.

Colonel Erkin Esenaliev, deputy head of Osh regional police, appeared with the politicians to assure the crowds that his officers were on their side and would not act against them.

Some bystanders expressed concern that with so many young men on the loose, the opposition leaders would be unable to stop looting. The congress ordered the formation of informal militias to keep order. Artykov had earlier toured the streets calling on people not to damage public property, “It no longer belongs to Akaev, it’s all ours, the people’s.”

Artykov set the tone for the opposition’s new, tough stance when it came to talking to the Kyrgyz authorities, telling reporters, “We do not intend to hold any more negotiations with the authorities or Akaev. We have attempted to negotiate but with no result.”

By contrast, the government in Bishkek showed a degree of readiness to talk to its opponents that it had not displayed in recent weeks. Late on March 20, Prime Minister Nikolai Tanaev told TV viewers that negotiations were needed, and his remarks were backed up by officials from the presidential administration the following morning.

Chotonov was unsympathetic to the offer, saying, “The authorities have been trying the voters’ patience for too long: they waited more than ten days, hungry and in the rain, for government representatives to come and see them, but no one did.

“Now we’ve realised what Akaev’s vaccine is: to crush the people’s will by exhausting their physical strength and nerves. I don’t think the people will negotiate with him now.”

Chotonov’s words were echoed by Otunbaeva, who said, “Once popular rule has been established in Batken region [the third province of south Kyrgyzstan], the opposition forces will be ready to march on Bishkek. We are ready to stand till the end in order that our demand for Askar Akaev’s resignation is met. We no longer see any subject on which we could negotiate with the government.”

In Bishkek, Kurmanbek Bakiev held out the possibility of talks – but only if they were with Akaev, not his ministers.

“The fact that Tanaev, [presidential staff deputy chief Bolot] Januzakov and other ministers want to start talks is not a solution to the problem,” he said. “They don’t resolve such matters, it is not within their mandate, and it will be time spent in vain.

“Akaev alone should take part in negotiations. I realise that if all the state bodies that were responsible for falsifying the elections are dismissed, it will be difficult to rule the country and retain political stability. That is the reason for holding a dialogue with the president. If Akaev will not want to talk on his own, I believe he’ll be forced to by international organisations.”

At the moment the authorities are not giving clear signals as to whether they would accept such talks.

Valentin Bogatyriov, the head of the International Institute for Strategic Research and a presidential adviser, told IWPR, “The opposition is prepared to hold negotiations, but the thing is that they want to negotiate only with the president himself and don’t want to talk to anyone else. I don’t know whether the president is ready for talks.”

A senior official, who wished to remain anonymous, was pessimistic, saying, “It’s hard for me to envisage successful negotiations, as there are no real subjects to talk about. A number of opposition leaders see no point in negotiating, and Akaev himself isn’t ready for talks.”

At the height of the weekend’s turbulent events, there was some confusion about Akaev’s whereabouts. Reports from opposition sources that he was in fact in Moscow seeking to shore up his political position were confirmed by Central Asia-watcher Arkady Dubnov, who writes for the Moscow newspaper Vremia Novostei.

“Despite denials from the presidential press secretary and the state secretary, Askar Akaev is in fact in Moscow. He arrived there late on Saturday night [March 20]. Sources in president Putin’s administration confirmed this. They also noted that on Sunday, Putin did not meet with Akaev. They don’t know whether the meeting will take place later,” said Dubnov.

Later on March 21, Akaev was back in Bishkek, although he missed the Nooruz celebration he usually appears at.

Although Akaev did not directly address the dramatic events in the south, he appeared to be making an attempt to deal with some of the concerns previously raised by the opposition. The official news agency Kabar reported that the president called a meeting with Central Election Commission chief Sulaiman Imanbaev and the head of Kyrgyzstan’s supreme court, Kurmanbek Osmonov, and instructed them to speed up the work of checking complaints and disputes over the recent elections. He directed them to focus on those constituencies where the “public response” had been greatest.

In Osh, late on March 21, opposition supporters seized 96 members of a police snatch unit that had allegedly led the police raid on the regional government building, and were now at the airport trying to leave.

Earlier in the day, opposition leader Bakiev warned, “The situation in the south is changing rapidly and

people are becoming less controllable, and that is causing grave concern to our representatives in Osh and Jalalabad. The situation is extremely explosive.”

Alisher Saipov is a correspondent for the Fergana news agency. Alla Pyatibratova is an independent journalist in Osh. Ainagul Abdrakhmanova is IWPR’s programme coordinator in Kyrgyzstan. Leila Saralaeva is an independent journalist in Bishkek.

**Location:** Central Asia  
Uzbekistan  
Turkmenistan  
Tajikistan

**Focus:** Central Asia

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyzstan-trial-strength>