

Language Politics in Kyrgyzstan

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Opposition leader Felix Kulov must pass a Kyrgyz-language exam many believe was originally invented to thwart him.

The Kyrgyz presidential race gained pace this week with the news that former security chief and key opposition leader Felix Kulov would run for office.

Kulov, recently released from prison after serving almost five years on corruption charges widely thought to be politically motivated, is seen as one of the front-runners. The other is Kurmanbek Bakiev, currently acting prime minister and president.

But Kulov, who speaks mostly Russian although he is Kyrgyz, faces a major hurdle before campaigning even begins. According to the election code, he must pass a Kyrgyz language exam. The constitution also requires that the president speak the language, though as former state secretary Ishenbay Abdrazakov points out it, “does not mean that the candidate should know it perfectly”.

“I will pass this exam,” vowed Kulov at a press conference announcing his intention to run, adding he can converse in basic Kyrgyz, read newspapers and listen to the radio – skills he honed during his imprisonment.

Kulov was freed after the ousting of Askar Akaev in March, and has since been acquitted of all charges.

Observers, however, are doubtful, that Kulov has enough linguistic skills to pass the exam, saying that his recent media interviews suggest it is at best basic. To test their knowledge, presidential candidates must describe their election programme in writing, verbally discuss the main points of their platform, and read a printed text out loud.

Kulov has promised to ensure stability in Kyrgyzstan and to protect the rights of Russian-speaking citizens.

In the early Soviet years, everyone learned Kyrgyz, but in the Sixties it stopped being used as the main teaching medium in city schools, meaning many urban youths like Kulov studied only in Russian and grew up without a formal knowledge of their native language.

Only in 1989 was Kyrgyz revived as the state language, but by then just one school in the capital Bishkek used it as the teaching medium.

The language exam for presidential hopefuls was introduced in 2000. Ironically, many believe this was done specifically to thwart Kulov’s attempt to run against Askar Akaev.

Kulov refused to sit the exam, a difficult test that required candidates, for example, to discuss 18th century Kyrgyz poetry.

Akaev, who went to a rural school and speaks the language well, sailed through with ease, though his

success was somewhat marred by the national news agency Kabar, which reported that he had passed a day before he actually sat the test.

Kyrgyz are divided on whether presidential candidates should speak the language, with some saying it is discriminatory and others arguing it is a basic requirement if the president is to communicate with the bulk of the electorate.

“Discrimination against citizens for language knowledge is a direct violation of international pacts on... human rights signed by Kyrgyzstan,” said Tolekan Ismailova, the head of the non-government group Civil Society Against Corruption.

“Language is a political tool used to remove certain candidates from the race.”

Asiya Sasykbaeva, head of the Interbilim organisation which works on education and human rights, believes the president ought to know Kyrgyz but does not think that should be checked by some commission.

“It is... a humiliating procedure. If he get bring the country out of crisis, why is this commission needed? By having this linguistic commission, we make it possible to discriminate against people who don't speak Kyrgyz,” Sasykbaeva told IWPR.

Lawyer Shamara Maichiev said it should be up to voters – not commissioners or language examiners – to decide whether the candidates speak adequate Kyrgyz.

“Knowledge of Kyrgyz should be determined by the voters themselves. That is to say, the extent to which they understand the president,” he said.

“I am in favour of the president knowing the language well enough to talk to voters. But they should not be tested, as the voters should decide which president they need.”

Others, however, say that without fluent Kyrgyz, the president will never be accepted as a serious politician.

Nazgul Turdubekova, a human rights activist, maintains the head of state must be able to speak to his own people – in both Kyrgyz and Russian.

“The requirements made in the election code are realistic, and can be studied for if desired. If we do not give importance to the state language, we will disappear as a nation,” said Turdubekova.

Political scientist Nur Omarov, agreed, but said it was important to administer the test fairly, “Knowledge of Kyrgyz is compulsory. How can the president of the country not know his native language?”

“The linguistic commission must set the exams without bias and not set itself the goal of failing one candidate or another.”

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