

Opposition Fears Kyrgyz Rubber Stamp Parliament

Author: [IWPR Central Asia](#)

While the government claims the ruling party's domination of parliament will make the legislative process more effective, opposition leaders fear the institution's independence has been fatally undermined. Zayniddin Kurmanov, who chairs the parliamentary committee of Ak Jol, the party that won a landslide in the recent elections in Kyrgyzstan, is a confident man.

After Ak Jol took the lion's share of seats in the assembly after the December 16 poll, Kurmanov is in a position to maintain a balance of power between parliament and President Kurmanbek Bakiev and believes this will usher in a new era.

Instead of the sterile politics of confrontation between legislators and executive, he predicts an era of cooperation for the common good.

Drawing on a fable by the 19th century Russian writer Ivan Krylov, Kurmanov said the new parliament would not be like the swan, crayfish and pike who tried to tow a cart in different directions, as a result of which it got nowhere.

Instead, he says, Kyrgyz parliamentarians will now pull their proverbial cart in one direction only, taking joint responsibility for their actions.

While Kurmanov paints a rosy vision of cooperation between parliament and president, others are less sure this will happen.

Some opposition members fear that the new assembly will be more of a rubber stamp for the president than a true partner, and that it will surrender its power to hold the executive to account.

They are concerned that President Bakiev wants to exercise the same near-total control over his country that Vladimir Putin has in Russia.

Nikolay Baylo of the Communist Party warns that a mood of "political euphoria" has gone to the head of the victorious Ak Jol.

"If we don't use this historic chance to build up parliamentarianism in Kyrgyzstan, the legislature will just take the same form as the old Supreme Soviet of the USSR," he said.

Omurbek Abdrakhmanov, a leader of the most influential opposition party, Ata Meken, makes the same point even more vehemently. Ata Meken, which was not awarded any seats even though it won more votes than any other opposition party, is understandably critical of the new assembly.

Abdrakhmanov claims that most of the new Ak Jol parliamentarians did not truly compete for their seats

and only won them as a result of the heavy-handed use of the “administrative resource” – common shorthand for government pressure.

“These people were ‘elected’ by two or three people sitting in a room, who drew up a list of those who were to get into parliament,” claimed Abdrakhmanov.

“Such parliamentarians will always be in debt to the bosses who actually appointed them. Even if they have their own opinions, they won’t be able to express them, since the ‘top’ will decide everything for them every time.”

Abdrakhmanov concluded, “Just like parliamentarians in Soviet times, they will unanimously support decisions handed down from above... and we have to realise that this situation will bring the country to a political and economic standstill.”

The government naturally rejects this assessment entirely.

Ak Jol’s Kurmanov insists President Bakiev has no desire to crush the life out of parliament and turn it into a body with no real functions.

“There is a special kind of relationship between parliament and the president, whereby he defines the major courses of internal and external policy,” he said.

Kurmanov said the head of state had no interest in converting parliament into an extension of the executive. On the contrary, he noted that the president had already given it a list of urgent issues to tackle at its next session.

Outlined in a speech Bakiev gave to the chamber on January 10, these include major issues of social and economic development such as property problems, the fuel and energy sector and an agreement on a new retirement age for workers.

Abdrakhmanov says this is empty talk. Moreover, he likens talk of the youth and diversity of the new Ak Jol members to the “representation” proclaimed by Soviet-era institutions.

“I used to work as a [Soviet Communist] party secretary and we used to nominate deputies like that,” he recalled. “They included representatives of all social strata, such as tractor drivers and shepherds. At my sovkhos [farm] all the dairymaids were nominated, but such nominees never really voiced the interests of the rank and file; they just carried out what they were told to do.”

This time round, he warned, “Voters should not be mistaken and harbour false hopes; they should take a good look at their history.”

Karybek Baibosunov, a Kyrgyz political analyst, takes a more moderate view, insisting it is too soon to jump to conclusions about the new parliament’s likely action.

“The new parliament is just being formed,” he pointed out. “But it will only become a parliament in the professional sense by the beginning of 2009.”

Baibosunov suggested it was not entirely fair to claim all the new Ak Jol members were mere ciphers for the president.

“There are professionals there who have a deep knowledge of our problems,” he said. “There are many specialists in the parliament who are competent in energy, jurisprudence and agriculture.”

Indeed, Baibosunov predicted that these three fields will form the basis of most of the legislators’ activity.

In the meantime, questions linger about the new parliament’s democratic credentials. Western election observers heavily criticised both the handling of the polls and the complex arrangements under which most parties were excluded from taking seats, whether or not they won votes nationwide.

While Ak Jol now shares the assembly with a minority of Social Democrats and Communists, the biggest opposition party - Ata Meken - is left out in the cold on the grounds that it did not gain the required number of votes in each of the nine electoral units in the country.

Tolkunbek Turdubaev is a correspondent for the BBC’s office in Bishkek.

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