

Opposition Plans Alternative Kyrgyz "Parliament"

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Frustrated by the ruling party's landslide victory in recent polls, the opposition decides to set up a rival forum.

Furious at the outcome of the December parliamentary election, which they insist was marred by serious fraud, Kyrgyz opposition parties say they intend to set up their own alternative assembly.

The Movement for Justice, an umbrella group of 12 opposition parties and 21 non-government organisations, NGOs, announced their decision to set up what they are calling the "Public Parliament" at a forum in the capital Bishkek.

According to the organisers, the alternative assembly will not claim to be a rival legislature designed to subvert or replace the legal parliament, the Jogorku Kenesh. Instead, it will offer a platform for the opposition to present its views to the public on a range of current political issues.

One of the coordinators of the Public Parliament said the new body would start working within weeks. "The first session will take place before February 15," said this source, who did not want to be named. "We are currently working on its regulations and statute."

He stressed, "Those who are behind the establishment of a Public Parliament are not trying to set up a body equivalent to the Jogorku Kenesh."

However, he added that he hoped the assembly would have the potential to develop into something more than a talking shop.

Political observer Tamerlan Ibraimov agreed, predicting that the Public Parliament would not be a rival to the Jogorku Kenesh but "a forum where the opposition parties and NGOs can express their views".

"It's difficult to tell whether this body will be able to change anything," he added. "But... any opportunity that allows political forces to express and discuss alternative viewpoints will be... good for the whole of society."

Opposition parties have been mulling the plan ever since the December 16 parliamentary election turned into a landslide for the Ak Jol party, which is loyal to the incumbent president, Kurmanbek Bakiev.

Western election observers from the OSCE broadly sided with opposition complaints that the poll had been marred by numerous irregularities, and noted reports of ballot-stuffing in particular.

Adding to the opposition's discontent were the complex electoral rules under which parties were obliged to win a minimum number of votes in each of the nine election areas in order to get any seats at all. As a result, the most popular opposition party Ata Meken, failed to win a single seat.

While many opposition parties now view the official parliament as illegitimate, observers agree that the alternative assembly would be unwise to set itself up as a rival legislature.

Syrgak Abdyldaev, another political expert, voiced doubts about what the rival assembly could achieve in practice.

“We will need to see to what extent the Public Parliament can effectively influence the political situation in the country,” he said. “Right now, I don’t see any real mechanism by which it can influence or pressure the government.”

Nevertheless, Abdyldaev concedes that the Public Parliament might be a good idea if it helps unify Kyrgyzstan’s fragmented opposition.

“This parliament could become a tribune for consolidating disparate political forces and interests – it could even become a consolidating force for the entire nation,” he agreed.

Ainura Usupbaeva, who heads the Taza Shailoo or “Fair Elections” association, said, “Everything depends on who joins the parliament. The Public Parliament must develop a considered domestic and foreign policy. It must protest against the situation that exists in Kyrgyzstan today. Many things will depend on how the discussion goes and who becomes a member.”

While the sponsors of the Public Parliament plot their strategy, deputies sitting in the country’s official legislature are taking a relaxed view of the new body.

Deputies who belong to opposition parties naturally feel sympathy for the parties that were denied seats in parliament as a result of the electoral rules.

Social Democratic leader Bakyt Beshimov described the alternative assembly as “a constructive idea” on the grounds that “the last elections were falsified and the votes of many parties, including those of the Social Democrats, were stolen”.

If the ruling party was not prepared to allow opposition forces to hold the number of seats they truly deserved in the national parliament, those parties had no option but to adopt an alternative strategy.

“If the government does not want to talk to moderate people, then it will [end up] talking to the radicals,” he warned. “If it does not want to talk within the walls of the parliament, it will have to talk on the streets and in the squares.”

More surprisingly, Rashid Tagaev, an Ak Jol deputy, would not condemn the rival assembly, saying only that it was too soon to judge whether it should be taken seriously.

“The alternative parliament has not yet started its work and it’s not clear how it will operate,” he said. “Let them start their work and then we will see.”

Tagaev did point out, however, that the most obvious way for opposition parties to be heard is through their representatives in the official parliament.

“If opposition leaders want to be heard, there are opposition parties in the Jogorku Kenesh,” he said. “The opposition can make its views public through them.”

The Public Parliament’s supporters disagree, saying the fact that Ak Jol now holds 71 out of the 90 seats in parliament makes the opposition virtually irrelevant there.

Supporters of the Public Parliament hope that apart from putting forward alternative programmes on issues ranging from property rights to the use of mineral resources and the constitution, it will become the means by which the opposition parties can finally unite.

Green Party leader Erkin Bulekbaev said he hoped the opposition parties could use the new forum to rally under one banner and put forward a single candidate for the next presidential elections.

“The Public Parliament is practically an alternative to the pro-presidential party Ak Jol,” he said.

Whether the Public Parliament can succeed in forging real unity and a sense of purpose among the fractured opposition parties remains to be seen.

Political scientist Syrgak Abdyl daev says the fact that the opposition was defeated so convincingly in the December election may - ironically - help to unite its various parts at long last.

“This could mark the first step towards the consolidation of their forces,” he said. “If they don’t unite now, they are doomed to failure,” he said.

Temir Sariiev agreed, saying the parties had started to realise they could not continue to maintain separate positions. “I also think the government’s actions will encourage the opposition to consolidate,” he added.

But much doubt remains over whether the Public Parliament can succeed in being heard.

Analysts Syrgak Abdyl daev says a real crisis could develop in Kyrgyzstan if the opposition forum went one step further from articulating its own views to actually disputing the legitimacy of the Jogorku Kenesh.

“The Jogorku Kenesh may adopt some law and the Public Parliament declare it as ‘fake and dead’,” he said, outlining one possible scenario.

“But there is another scenario, such as a repetition of the storming of the Government House on March 24, 2005,” he added, referring to the mass protests that forced Bakiev’s predecessor Askar Akaev from office.

“However, President Bakiev has made it clear he will deploy the special [riot] police in such an eventuality - he will deal with the situation unceremoniously,” Abdyldaev warned.

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Location: Kyrgyzstan

Focus: Central Asia

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/opposition-plans-alternative-kyrgyz-parliament>