

## **Partying and Politics in Kyrgyzstan**

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Is the president's new-found frugality a way of stopping potential opponents from funding effective election campaigns?

Calls by Kyrgyz president Askar Akaev to limit early campaigning for next year's presidential election and stop extravagant spending on public celebrations are all part of a thinly-veiled attempt to silence his opponents, opposition figures say.

Akaev made the two requests on January 19, during a meeting with community representatives from Bishkek, arguing that extended electoral campaigns and showy festivals serve only to damage the Kyrgyz economy. He then repeated his appeal – which officially does not carry binding force – when he met representatives from the surrounding Chui region the following day.

But critics say the request for candidates to hold off on campaigning for the 2005 election is designed to suppress political opposition and bolster Akaev's standing.

And while the president's appeal to reduce the amount of money his officials spend on over-the-top festivities was accepted by some as a sensible and purely economic move, others suggested it was intended simply to disguise the political nature of the first request by allowing the two to be presented as one palatable package.

"This was a tactically correct step, to serve up two dishes on the same tray. The majority of people swallowed both dishes and approved," said editor-in-chief of the independent newspaper Tribune Yrysbek Omurzakov.

Abdil Segizbaev, Akaev's press secretary, defended the president's appeal to avoid early electioneering. "Look at the economic figures for 2002, when the people held [political] meetings – they are minimal. That was a lost year for the country economically. But take 2003, when there was a certain political stability... gross domestic product immediately increased by six or seven per cent," he said.

Bolot Januzakov, deputy head of the presidential administration, told IWPR that Akaev is simply urging the electorate to concentrate on solving the country's economic and social problems. Politicians who launch early election campaigns often do so with the intention of stirring up trouble for their own political ends, he said.

Opposition figures have criticised the move.

Director of the Institute of Human Rights Topchubek Turgunaliyev, among the staunchest opponents of the current government, told IWPR that Akaev's appeal is rooted in his fear of political competition.

Ishenbai Kadyrbekov, a parliamentary deputy who recently announced his intention to stand in the election, agreed that Akaev's appeal is no more than a clumsy attempt to suppress opposition to his rule.

"Akaev's team was very concerned by statements from a number of politicians, including myself, that we would stand for president. They were also concerned by the unification of opposition parties in the

movement 'For Power of the People!' in the election race," he said.

The criticism is not limited to opponents of the president, with many more moderate observers speaking out against the request. "The election campaign might go underground [as a result of this appeal], increasing suspicion between the regime and the opposition," said Muratbek Imanaliev, a former minister of foreign affairs who now leads the centrist Justice and Progress party. "This is unjust towards [Akaev's] rivals, especially as the president is doing it in the build-up to elections."

"For Democracy and Civil Society", a coalition of non-governmental organisations, also criticised the appeal.

"Heads of national and local authorities may use this initiative to create obstacles for legitimate activity by political parties and civil activists," read a statement released by the coalition on January 22.

"Every word the president utters is a direct order for action for all officials," coalition president Edil Baisalov told IWPR. "So we are concerned that officials will create obstacles for the civic education activities we are planning to carry out before the elections."

Baisalov also expressed concern that placing limits on campaigning might prevent people from making informed decisions. "How will voters make the right choice if there is no election campaign?" he asked.

"This moratorium is as stupid and pointless as asking us to stop breathing. We have freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly and meetings. And the president, as guarantor of the constitution, should ensure those rights, not restrict them."

Baisalov told IWPR that he believes the move is designed to ensure the president's rivals have no chance of election success.

Akaev's call for high-ranking state officials to limit their spending on lavish banquets and ceremonies, for example to mark important dates for their villages and towns or to honour historical figures - received a warmer reception.

"The president has made a proposal to officials, businessmen and those who are well-off to live more modestly. Recently, there has been a tendency to hold large celebrations, especially in rural areas, where a lot of money is spent and a huge number of animals are slaughtered," said Segizbaev.

This becomes even more unsavoury, he said, when people compete to see who can hold the most costly, often leaving villagers in poverty for months afterwards.

Some of those who criticised Akaev's appeal to limit early election campaigns viewed this second request in a more positive light.

"There needs to be a ban on [these sorts of] celebrations, which last for 10 or 15 hours, where 20 animals are slaughtered, the vodka flows in rivers, and by the end of it, people have forgotten the reason why they gathered," said Imanaliev.

“Banquets and celebrations are a social disaster for Kyrgyzstan, a real scourge for the country,” agreed Karabekov. “These celebrations need to be banned for good, especially those that are celebrated at the expense of the state or the people.”

But some extended their criticism to this second point.

Turgunaliyev told IWPR that it was too little, too late. “The powers that be have been feasting for 12 years and have [already] emptied out the state treasury and impoverished the people,” he said, arguing that the move is an empty gesture aimed at currying favour among prospective voters.

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