

South Ossetia Parliament Blocks Deal to End Protests

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Moscow got outgoing leader and his would-be successor to agree on defusing tensions, but parliament said no.

A deal that would have ended the mass protests that followed South Ossetia's disputed presidential election looks set to collapse after parliament, which is dominated by allies of outgoing president Eduard Kokoity, refused to approve key elements of the agreement.

In a surprise result, opposition leader Alla Jioyeva won the election earlier this month, defeating Kremlin-backed favourite Anatoly Bibilov.

Bibilov alleged fraud, and the Supreme Court agreed with him, cancelling the results and calling a new poll for March.

Jioyeva's supporters massed in their thousands in the centre of Tskinal, demanding that she be recognised as legitimate president. (See **South Ossetia Vote Descends into Stand-Off**.)

On December 9, Kokoity and Jioyeva signed a deal brokered by Russia, one of only a handful of countries that have recognised South Ossetia as an independent state distinct from Georgia, from which it split after a war in the early 1990s.

Under the terms of the deal, Jioyeva agreed to accept the authorities' requirement that a fresh election take place in March. For his part, Kokoity agreed that he would step down, as would Prosecutor General Taimuraz Khugaev and Supreme Court chairman Atsamaz Bichenov.

But on December 14, the South Ossetian parliament, dominated by Kokoity's Unity party, refused to approve the deal.

Jioyeva responded, "I will appeal to my supporters for calm, but I cannot guarantee that they will remain quiet in the face of this negative development. All the guilt lies with Kremlin officials, since everyone is aware that Kokoity would have fallen long ago if there hadn't been such massive patronage."

It is rare for a prominent South Ossetian to criticise Russia so openly, since Moscow is seen as a key ally and financial sponsor. In 2008, Russia fought a brief war with Georgia when the latter tried to regain control of South Ossetia.

While Jioyeva said parliament's ruling was illegal, other politicians blamed Kokoity, who has dominated the small republic for a decade, for the mess.

"Until Kokoity understands that he has to leave politics once and for all, the people will not calm down and will not retreat," parliament's deputy speaker Yury Dzitsoyti said.

Dzitsoyti criticised the decision his fellow-members of parliament had taken, saying it would only make the atmosphere worse.

Kokoity's supporters insisted that he did keep his side of the deal by asking parliament to sack the two officials. They said it was up to parliament whether to approve the request.

"You have to admit that the executive fulfilled its part of the agreement," presidential adviser Kosta Dzugaev said. "It's another matter that the legislative authority as represented by parliament was not included in the text of the agreement."

Zurab Kokoyev, acting speaker of parliament and a member of Kokoity's Unity party, said no one had the right to tell legislators what to do.

"The final term of the agreement remains unfulfilled, but it's the members who decide - I cannot order anyone around," he said.

Of the 31 out of 34 members of parliament present for the vote, 15 voted in favour of sacking the prosecutor and 15 against, with one abstention. Only eight voted in favour of sacking the head of the Supreme Court, meaning neither decision could be implemented.

According to Communist Party leader Stanislav Kochiev, "Sadly, a large proportion of deputies simply did not sense the responsibility that had been placed upon them.... Parliament must not reject decisions that have been reached through so much hard work, and through the mediation of the Russian Federation."

Sergei Zassejev, a representative of Jioyeva who attended the parliamentary session, called on Russia to step in.

“Russia must intervene in this situation... since it acted as guarantors of the agreement,” he said.

He worried that the government would breach other elements in the agreement, and prevent Jioyeva standing in the fresh elections slated for on March 25.

“The situation could slip out of control at any moment,” he said. “There’s no guarantee the opposition will be able to control the people who have been demanding the dismissal of Khugaev and Bichenov.”

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Topic: Protests

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