

## **Talks Fail to Avert Kyrgyz Opposition Rally**

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Government concessions not enough to persuade opposition to call off planned rally. Opposition representatives have pledged to press ahead with plans for a November 2 rally demanding the resignation of President Kurmanbek Bakiev and Prime Minister Felix Kulov, despite the Kyrgyz head of state's agreement to grant them two of their demands.

But the protest seems to be more about pressuring the president into more concessions than forcing him to stand down, with some leading opposition figures admitting that the latter might lead to serious political instability which the country can ill-afford.

At an October 31 meeting between opposition figures, Bakiev and other senior officials, the president effectively agreed to turn state television into a public channel and to propose constitutional reforms that would see the country run by a political system close to a parliamentary form of government.

But the president was unwilling to concede to the opposition's other demands, which include the formation of new coalition government and the sacking of the Kyrgyz prosecutor general and the Bishkek police chief.

Political tensions have been rising over a number of weeks, with the opposition claiming that the authorities were refusing to meet for face-to-face talks over their demands. An October 21 meeting was cancelled after both sides accused each other of reneging on a pre-agreed schedule.

In the wake of the most recent meeting, those close to the authorities claimed the opposition simply wanted to overthrow Bakiev, while the opposition appeared to tone down its rhetoric suggesting that there was still time for the government to meet their demands.

Topchubek Turgunaliyev, the leader of the Erkindik party, which is broadly aligned with the president, said he felt the opposition could do a deal with the government if it wanted to, but doubted that this would happen.

"Constitutional reform is not the main reason for the conflict between the regime and the opposition. The main reason is the opposition's hunger for power. They have set themselves the task of taking power into their hands at any price," he told IWPR.

The main opposition grouping, Movement for Reform, insisted, however, that the ball was firmly in Bakiev's court. "Now everything is up to the president. If he fulfils the opposition's demands, then a consensus may be reached. Otherwise the rally scheduled for November 2 will call for the resignation of Bakiev and Kulov," said Temir Sariev, a member of the movement.

Leading opposition figure Azimbek Beknazarov, the head of the Asaba party, agreed there was still an opportunity for the president to return to the negotiating table, "There is still time for talks. It is possible to sit down at the discussion table once again."

But in a sign that some in the opposition have lost patience with Bakiev, another leading figure, Melis Eshimkanov, held a press conference on November 1 announcing that the rally would go ahead as planned and would continue until “fundamental changes” were made.

While the opposition hopes the rally will force Bakiev’s hand over remaining demands, not everyone is calling for the president and his premier to go. Some are concerned that a change of leadership could trigger civil unrest.

“If there is an attempt to change power on November 2, it could cause very serious disturbances. It could spark a conflict. So while we will keep to our position on a number of issues, we must give the president the chance to complete his constitutional term,” said deputy Kubatbek Baibolov.

Some observers, meanwhile, have cautioned against the opposition demanding solutions to the country’s problems in the form of apparent ultimatums, suggesting that even if Bakiev’s political rivals forced him to stand down they’d struggle to find someone to replace him.

“Even if there is a change of power – who would be the next leader? Who will the opposition put forward? They have not been able to put forward a national leader who could guide the country towards development and prosperity since [former president] Askar Akaev left. If Bakiev goes, then the problem will arise once more of putting forward a strong national leader,” said Bakyt Beshimov, the vice-president of the American University of Central Asia.

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