

## **Unsportsmanlike Behaviour in Kyrgyzstan**

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Kyrgyz wrestler who sought to lead national Olympic committee meets an untimely end. The death of a wrestler running for the chairmanship of Kyrgyzstan's troubled Olympic committee appears to be yet another contract killing – the latest in a string of murders of prominent Kyrgyz.

An unknown assailant shot Raatbek Sanatbaev in the capital Bishkek on January 8. Police have so far said little about the assassination of the two-time Olympic competitor and world championship winner, who had recently worked as deputy head of the national Olympic training centre.

Close associates, however, insist Sanatbaev's death is linked with his intention to run for the prestigious position of national Olympic chairman – a job made vacant in September by the murder of the previous incumbent.

"This is a contract killing connected with the election for the chairmanship of the national Olympic committee. We knew for a fact that [Sanatbaev] intended to stand for this position, he actively campaigned for it and had a real chance of being elected - but he seriously got in someone's way," said a January 12 statement signed by members of the Kyrgyz sporting community including fellow wrestler Ruslan Iskenov, boxer Orzubek Nazarov and kickboxer Joldoshbek Bekboev.

The authorities deny that Sanatbaev's murder was connected with his Olympic aspirations.

His death is the third in recent months connected with Kyrgyzstan's Olympic committee.

Bayaman Erkinbaev, a member of parliament and chair of the Olympic committee, was gunned down on September 21 by a lone assailant near his apartment block.

Erkinbaev was a powerful figure in Kyrgyzstan whose business interests included a hotel in the southern city of Osh and the giant wholesale market in Karasuu, a hub for traders from all over Central Asia and China.

He was the second member of parliament killed since the March revolution brought the current government to power. Investigations into the murders are continuing, but discontent is high over the government's inability to root out organised crime figures and their insidious connections with business and politics.

The atmosphere surrounding the Olympic body is so tense that when Kadyr Atagaraev, who headed the field hockey federation, died of a heart attack at an Olympic committee meeting on January 5, rumours of foul play began circulating.

Even before recent events, the Olympic committee was beset by controversy. Eshim Kutmanaliev ran the body for 15 years but was eventually forced out by supporters of Aidar Akaev, the ex-president's son, who took over in January 2004.

The body came in for much criticism. "There were no Olympic games competitors on the national Olympic committee," said Almaz Sayakov, a committee member. "This situation continued for 15 years."

After the March revolution, President Askar Akaev and his family fled the country and Kutmanaliev was briefly re-elected, and later replaced by Erkinbaev.

The International Olympic Committee has expressed concern about the Kyrgyz situation and has frozen funding to the national committee while the situation is sorted out. It has also warned that the new chairman should have an impeccable reputation.

Candidates for the job include sportsmen, businessmen and the head of the Kyrgyzstan Fencing Federation, Ryspek Akmatbaev, who is currently on trial for murder.

Observers doubt the candidates will heed the international committee's warning about conducting a clean campaign. Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest countries in Central Asia, and the top job in sports is a prestigious one. The president attends the Olympics free of charge, and receives an 800 US dollar monthly salary.

"Not every minister receives such a salary here. And this would go on for five years, plus free trips," said Bektur Asanov, the head of the state culture and sport department.

He believes Sanatbaev's murder was planned by those opposed to the government of Kurmanbek Bakiev. "All this is being done to discredit and compromise the new regime," he said.

Iskenov also worries that the murders and scandals surrounding the Olympic body will harm Kyrgyzstan's reputation. "We have the image of a scandal-ridden country. Because of this, we could be excluded from the International Olympic Committee."

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