

Uzbek Opposition to Boycott Election "Lie"

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Parties try to put up candidates for a new-style parliament, but soon realise they don't stand a chance.

Opposition parties in Uzbekistan say they will boycott a parliamentary election next month, citing official obstructions which have prevented them fielding candidates and predicting that the vote will be neither free nor fair.

The Birlik and Ozod Dehkonlar parties announced their decision after attempts to register candidates across the country failed.

A third party, Erk, which like Birlik was founded more than a decade ago in opposition to President Islam Karimov's administration, said it would boycott the December 26 vote from the outset, saying it "did not want to take part in a lie".

The election will create a two-house parliament for the first time, replacing the old single-chamber body. The lower house will have 120 deputies elected on a constituency basis, less than half the 250 who now sit in the legislative chamber. The upper house will consist of 100 senators, 16 appointed by President Karimov and the rest picked by regional councils.

The Central Election Commission, CEC, says about 500 candidates will compete for the 120 legislature seats. Birlik and Ozod Dehkonlar (Free Farmers), a party set up only last year with the aim of attracting rural voters, hoped to be among them.

But since no Uzbek opposition group has been granted official recognition as a political party, they are barred from standing in their own name. Instead, the two parties opted to have their candidates stand as independents, nominated by public "initiative groups".

Even this was a step forward, since both Birlik and Erk – the oldest opposition groups – have operated more or less underground for a decade, with their leaders in exile. Over the last year, opposition parties have felt somewhat emboldened by indications that the government might at last grant them registration, under international pressure.

But when they tried to submit application papers to the local election offices around the country, they found officials reluctant to accept them.

Birlik succeeded in getting only one of the 16 candidates it hoped to field nationwide past the first hurdle when it successfully submitted documents in the southern town of Termez.

Leading figures in Birlik accuse election officials of a range of tactics to avoid processing its applications, including refusing to accept documents, closing election offices and even running away from them. In cases where documents were accepted, they were returned later with officials complaining that signatures in support of the candidate had been forged.

The November 11 deadline ran out before Birlik was able to prove that the signatures it collected were genuine, and in some cases even before it managed to track down the election staff.

The party's deputy chairman Ismail Dadajanov was among those whose papers were rejected when he put his name forward in the Fergana Valley city of Kokand. He had faced earlier problems when he arranged to hold a meeting of his initiative group in a local theatre, only to find the managers suddenly changed their mind and announced that the building urgently needed renovation work.

Also in the Fergana Valley, Bobojon Musojonov, claimed that Andijan police put pressure on members of his support group to say their personal details had been used without their knowledge.

Birlik member Aygul Mamatova was planning to stand for election in the western Samarkand region, but when she tried to find someone to hand her application to, she was told that all the election officials had gone away to pick cotton and would not be back.

The Ozod Dekhkonlar party ran into trouble when its leader Nigora Khidoyatova tried to gather her initiative group to finalise arrangements for her nomination. Two party members who came to the city of Fergana on November 9 - the preceding evening - to set the meeting up were attacked and beaten up. Instead of the attackers, the authorities arrested the party members and jailed them for 15 days.

Birlik says the CEC has ignored all its complaints about violations of election regulations.

A spokesman for the CEC denied allegations of misconduct by officials. Press secretary Sherzod Kudratkhojaev said it did not matter to his commission whether independent candidates represented an opposition party or not, since their nominations came from an initiative group, not the party itself.

Documents were rejected not to stop the opposition taking part in elections, but because the candidates - like many other independents - had broken many rules, said Kudratkhojaev.

He dismissed the allegations of police intimidation made by Birlik's Musojonov, saying, "There was no pressure on anyone; that information is not objective."

Some of the initiative group members did not even know their details were being used to nominate a candidate for the election, he said.

"How can these complaining opposition members nominate themselves as deputies - how can they call for order - if they commit violations themselves?" asked the CEC spokesman.

Dadajanov said that Birlik's failed attempt at fielding candidates had one saving grace: it showed that there will be no real choice on election day.

"We showed in practice that these elections cannot be honest if there were violations even at the initial stage of gathering documents," he said.

Bahodir Musaev, an independent political scientist, said the idea that the opposition would be able to nominate candidates was doomed from the start since President Karimov has no plans to allow true pluralism.

“These elections are without choice,” he said. “This system of power does not allow outsiders in.”

Musaev believes the opposition’s plan to urge voters not to take part in the election will fail for the same reasons, “The boycott will not work, because to achieve that, one would need an organised structure to conduct an extensive public campaign. The regime will not allow that.”

Despite the lack of opposition candidates, there will be five political parties on election day. All were set up with Karimov’s blessing and all are strongly pro-government, with few apparent policy differences.

An OSCE mission, visiting Uzbekistan in September to prepare the ground for election observers, said the political environment in which the elections would be held was “static”.

Hopes that the government would grant official registration to opposition parties failed to come to anything, said the OSCE report, adding, “The lack of registered opposition parties and obstacles for independent candidates seriously marginalises the possibilities for meaningful political competition.”

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