
CAN KYRGYZSTAN'S OPPOSITION BITE AS IT BARKS?

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Spring has come early in Kyrgyzstan and so the ragtag, non-parliamentary opposition is clamoring for attention. The government does not look like it is going to lose much sleep.

Since early March, southern politicians have been staging rallies demanding the resignation of the northern-dominated government. Issuing such ultimatums at political rallies has been a recurrent feature of Kyrgyz politics for more than a decade.

A March 14 meeting in Jalalabad city hinted these meetings were merely the rehearsal for a bigger March 24 demonstration in the southern city of Osh backed by the recently formed United Opposition Force (UOF).

Speaking at the Jalalabad event, opposition figure Bektur Asanov issued vague ultimatums.

In ten days in Osh a national Kurultai [peoples gathering] will be held. Atambayev has ten days to resign. Otherwise, he will be removed, in a legal way, blasted Asanov, a former governor of the Jalal-Abad province.

The timing of the March 24 event is no accident. The date marks the 11th anniversary of a northern-led government's overthrow in what was Kyrgyzstan's first post-Soviet revolution in 2005. Elections for the Osh city council are set to take place three days later, on March 27.

The UOFs seven-point demands include an appeal for the elections to proceed without the use of administrative resources. They are also calling for the formation of a new Cabinet and a freeze on electricity tariffs.

The leading lights of the nationalist-tinged UOF are familiar faces. They include disgraced former tax inspector Akhmatbek Keldibekov, ex- emergency situations minister Kamchibek Tashiyev, and Adakhan Madumarov, a former speaker of parliament and leader of the luckless Butun Kyrgyzstan party, which has missed out on winning seats by a whisker in the past two elections.

All three were top figures in the authoritarian regime of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, a Jalal-Abad native ousted in the countrys second revolution in 2010.

The most notorious figure among this opposition coalition is Tashiyev, a co-leader of the Ata-Jurt-Respublika bloc in parliament. Tashiyev, who is a trained boxer, was barred from taking his seat in the legislature following claims he roughed up a rival candidate ahead of Octobers parliamentary vote.

Although Tashiyev was not formally punished for the alleged attack, he has a history of using extra-legal methods to pursue his political goals. In 2012, he drew much scorn for scaling the gates of the main house of government along with his supporters during an anti-mining rally.

The south remains an Achilles heel for President Almazbek Atambayev and the government in Bishkek, although not to the same extent as the period following the bloody ethnic violence between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks communities there in 2010.

The ruling coalition contains a number of prominent southern elites whose influence has grown in recent years. A nationalist mayor who once controlled Osh like a personal fiefdom is living in exile and will face criminal charges if he returns.

Tashiyev, Madumarov and Keldibekov have also been effectively shut out of national politics, with the latter ordered to pay a court roughly \$150,000 in connection to graft-related offenses on March 11.

Nevertheless, the protests come at an inopportune time.

The broader regional economic crisis has given rise to cost-of-living concerns that will be particularly acute in the densely populated south, which is more dependent on shrinking migrant remittances from Russia than the north.

Speaking at a March 12 clean-up day in Bishkek, Atambayev seemed to offer an olive branch and a stick to the disaffected elites simultaneously.

I think the opposition and the ruling parties need to unite and work together. We have to admit shortcomings [in the government's work]. But those who say that they will come together and take power through coups are not the opposition – they are instigators and enemies of the people, said Atambayev.

Few are blind to the irony that Atambayev's own Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan seized power in 2010 through the very same kind of unrest he is accusing his opponents of trying to foment.

Kaynak/Source: