

Helsinki Commission Testimony

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Presidential Elections in Kyrgyzstan

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Dear Mr. Chairman, thank you for inviting me today. In my testimony I would like to focus on the events leading up to Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiyev's decision to schedule early presidential elections. I will then discuss the strategies being pursued by the president and opposition leading up to the election. My goal is to demonstrate that Kyrgyzstan is ruled by a small group of political leaders interested in advancing their own business interests. I intend to show that the domestic and foreign policy decisions of the Kyrgyz regime have been driven by a desire for self preservation. Both the upcoming elections and Bakiyev's February decision to expel the U.S. base from Manas airport illustrate this conclusion.

I will speak from the perspective of a Central Asian analyst who has been monitoring developments in Kyrgyzstan and the wider region my entire career. I publish weekly articles on key developments in Kyrgyzstan at the Jamestown Foundation. Mr. Chairman, from my daily monitoring of developments in Kyrgyzstan, it is my firm belief that the July 23rd election will be rigged. The outcome of the elections is predictable, with the government following a familiar pattern of alienating opposition forces and suppressing freedom of speech.

Bakiyev's regime

Approximately one month before the election day, Kyrgyzstan's incumbent leader Kurmanbek Bakiyev has clearly emerged as its most likely winner. The president has managed to strengthen his personal leverage over the parliament, the Central Elections Commission, as well as the security structures. The opposition forces, in the meantime, have become increasingly fragmented and inconsistent in their declared policy goals.

In February, when Bakiyev first announced his decision to stage an early presidential election, opposition forces saw a fresh opportunity to challenge his regime. However, as time elapsed, the opposition's hopes for ousting Bakiyev faded. A series of violent attacks against opposition members and journalists, lawsuits and political assassinations allegedly staged by the supporters of the regime, exposed Bakiyev's zeal to retain his grip on power. Today, some opposition members appear resigned to Bakiyev winning the forthcoming election.

During his four-year reign, Bakiyev has gradually expanded his powers. The president changed the constitution, carried out early parliamentary elections in December 2007, and increased his control over the security structures. Shortly before announcing the date of the presidential elections, the parliament composed mostly of his pro-regime bloc Ak Zhol, altered legislation to allow defense forces to intervene in internal affairs. Furthermore, the parliament increased governmental control over the mass media and NGOs.

In effect, Bakiyev was able to create a regime where few are involved in decision-making. Members of the parliament and government are generally able to act freely, and express their opinions without experiencing any direct pressure -so long as they refrain from supporting the opposition. As a result of these changes, Bakiyev was able to receive rapid support from his loyal parliament and Constitutional Court in scheduling elections for July 23rd, rather than waiting until the constitutionally defined election date in October 2010.

Bakiyev's control over security structures and contacts with criminal groups

Bakiyev's pervasive control of security structures and state leaders' collaboration with criminal groups is most alarming. Both tendencies remind political opponents that more aggressive actions could be taken against them. In the past year Bakiyev appointed his brother Zhanysh Bakiyev to head the National Security Guard, while his son Marat Bakiyev leads the National Security Service. His crony Adakhan Madumarov heads the Security Council, his former personal guard Bakytbek Kalyev is defense minister, and Moldomusa Kongantiev, another close friend, is minister of internal affairs.

Bakiyev's family members have similarly taken informal control of the country's major resources. Partly as a result, a fierce rivalry has emerged between Bakiyev's brother Zhanysh and Bakiyev's son, Maksim. This intra-family competition over cadre politics and control of businesses creates chaos in the country's political and economic domains. Both relatives are notorious for collaborating with criminal groups to exert influence.

Due to this state-crime nexus, five MPs have been assassinated in the past several years. The record of other political assassinations now extends to over a dozen, including the former presidential aide Medet Sadyrkulov, whose death in a suspicious car accident in March was the most recent example. As many in Kyrgyzstan believe, Sadyrkulov was killed for his alleged plans to support the opposition. Following the death of Sadyrkulov, political elites supporting the regime became more nervous about their own safety. Sadyrkulov's case has shown that no one is immune to political persecution and the regime will fight fiercely for its preservation.

In March, a journalist and member of the Ata Meken opposition party, Syrgak Abdyldayev, was severely beaten by unknown assailants. Abdyldayev was stabbed over a dozen times and was beaten with stones wrapped in towels until his arms, shoulders, and ribs were broken. Local NGO leaders believe this incident was a warning to other political activists in the country.

A number of Kyrgyz experts suspect Zhanysh Bakiyev of masterminding brutal attacks similar to the one against Abdyldayev and Sadyrkulov. Zhanysh was previously suspected of inserting heroin into opposition leader Omurbek Tekebayev's luggage while he was en route to Poland. Zhanysh was also suspected by many of sending a finger and ear of a dead vagrant to Sadyrkulov in 2007.

Why early elections?

Bakiyev's desire for re-election as early as this year is explained by his wish to secure the continuity of his regime amidst deteriorating economic conditions, low domestic approval rating, and the continuous energy shortages in the country.

In the run-up to the election, Bakiyev has been using both soft and hard powers to sideline his opponents. Opposition leaders complain that the Bakiyev regime is habitually disrupting their pre-election activities. Local law-enforcement forces control the opposition's daily activities within rural areas. At recent events

organized by the opposition leaders, provocateurs and policemen attacked opposition members of parliament. Among these were MP's from the Social Democratic Party Kubanychbek Kadyrov and Roza Otunbayeva, as well as the leaders of the Ata Meken party Omurbek Tekebyav and Bolot Sherniyazov.

As part of his campaign, Bakiyev has regularly emphasized the importance of economic growth and national security. In the past few weeks the government has produced a myriad of positive, yet false, reports concerning the state of the national economy.

In the meantime, parliamentarians from the pro-regime Ak Zhol party were ordered to actively work with their constituencies. Ak Zhol officials are meeting with their fellow villagers, bringing food, and butchering livestock to persuade them to vote for Bakiyev.

Opposition shows its incompetence

Few opposition members admit that they too, have failed to produce a coherent message that would prove popular among the politically active population. Instead, the same arguments about Bakiyev being a corrupt and undemocratic leader, intermixed with ethno-centric calls for patriotism, dominate the debate among opposition members.

To date, the United Opposition Movement (UOM), which is composed of several opposition parties, has been unable to demonstrate how and whether it will become a real challenge to Bakiyev. Achieving unity at the elections was the main goal for the movement. However, opposition forces are fractious and divided between its leaders. Two candidates from the opposition movement are running against Bakiyev. Shortly after the leader of the Social Democratic Party Almazbek Atambayev, announced his decision to run for president, his counterpart from the Akshumkar party Temir Sariyev also registered. Many within the opposition expect Sariyev to drop out from the race. In the event that Sariyev continues to resist this pressure, the opposition parties will have fewer resources to mount any challenge against the election results.

The divide among opposition leaders shows that Kyrgyzstan lacks leaders who would genuinely understand the importance of democracy, as well as the importance of building a stable state and open society ahead of own ambition. To date, neither Almazbek Atambayev nor Temir Sariyev communicated any new policies they intend to introduce if elected.

In a desperate search for support, some UOM leaders called for mobilizing crowds to protest against the current regime on the basis of Kyrgyz ethnic identity. Their reluctance to formulate strategies beyond anti-corruption slogans and ethno-centric ideas, demonstrated the UOM's faulty conviction in its own righteousness. For an ordinary Kyrgyz, opposition's calls for mobilization against Bakiyev are not backed by any realistic suggestions for economic development or establishing a just government. Several failed anti-government demonstrations in the past two years diminished the hopes of many for change.

Aside from Atambayev and Sariyev, Bakiyev's other competitors are too politically weak to represent any credible challenge to his regime. Some candidates were unable to collect the necessary number of signatures, while several candidates failed a Kyrgyz language exam - a filter invented by Akayev.

The presidential elections represent a considerable financial cost for any opposition candidate seeking to seriously challenge Bakiyev. The candidates will need to combat the Ak Zhol party on all levels - from the Central Elections Commission to the local government and elections observers.

If free and fair elections were conducted in Kyrgyzstan today, it is unlikely that Bakiyev would secure a majority of the vote. However, it is also doubtful that any of the candidates would gain enough votes to win the elections outright in the first round. Bakiyev will try to present favorable results in the first round of the elections, similar to his Central Asian counterparts who usually win elections by more than 90 percent.

Foreign policy and elections

In the foreign policy domain, Bakiyev is balancing between promises made to Russia and maintaining relations with the United States. Any decision on foreign policy is made with the idea of retaining his power, despite his low approval rating within the country.

The Bakiyev government has been conducting politics for the highest possible returns, searching for the better bargain from the United States or Russia. In the past Bakiyev was able to jack up U.S. payments significantly for the lease on Manas base. Likewise, this year Bakiyev government has been seeking additional income from both the United States and Moscow. In February, Bakiyev announced his decision to expel the U.S. from the Manas airbase in Bishkek by August 18, after Moscow promised over \$2 billion in loans.

Both in domestic and foreign policy Bakiyev has shown himself as a shrewd politician who has been able to surround himself with loyal and powerful cronies. The president protects his position by controlling the security agencies and collaborating with criminal structures. Under Bakiyev's regime we can expect little change towards democracy in Kyrgyzstan. It will take another round of constitutional reform and parliamentary and presidential elections to improve Kyrgyzstan's democratic record.

Recommendations

To prevent further deterioration of situation in Kyrgyzstan, the United States and international community must do the following:

1. The U.S. government and international community must be careful in assisting the Kyrgyz government with loans and investments.
2. Bakiyev must be pressured to conduct free and fair elections. Violation of human rights and violence against journalists and opposition leaders must be condemned.
3. Local civil society groups and mass media outlets must be encouraged to continue participating in public debates over government policies.
4. The links between the regime's financial interests and policy decisions must be investigated further.
5. Finally, regime holders' collaboration with the criminal groups to advance own interests must be investigated. Breaking the state-crime link in Kyrgyzstan could potentially enhance the rule of law, free political leaders from a dependence on criminal actors, and discourage people with criminal backgrounds from entering politics. At the transnational level, such an approach could result in more effective economic and political cooperation between the United States, Europe and Central Asia.

Thank you very much for your attention.