

Kyrgyzstan: One Referendum Does Not Make a Government

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While efforts continued to cope with the consequences of the mass violence that erupted on 9 June in the south of the small and mountainous ex-Soviet republic, including an anticipated death toll of more than 2,000 and more than 400,000 displaced persons, Kyrgyzstan's Interim Government pressed ahead with a referendum on a new Constitution on Sunday. Preliminary results indicate that turn out was around 70% of the population, with 91% voting in favour and just 8% against.

While those in favour of holding the referendum argue that these results give Roza Otunbaeva, who has been head of the Interim Government that took over when Kurmanbek Bakiev fled Bishkek on 7 April in the wake of bloody clashes with protesters, a clear mandate to form a government and that it is an important step towards socio-political stabilisation. Opponents, however, argue that going ahead with the referendum is an empty gesture by a group of politicians incapable of offering effective leadership to the shaken republic.

Regardless of which view is taken, it is clear that Kyrgyzstan recovery is still far from assured. Aspirations to create a parliamentary democracy are no doubt laudable in the opinion of the international community, but are no substitute for addressing the immediate concerns of the population regarding their safety and security. Certainly, reform of the political system is a part of this, but with parliamentary elections scheduled to take place by October, there is a real risk that the already fractious government will once again become preoccupied by infighting and the pursuit of personal interests.

This risk is heightened by two issues. Firstly, those people now serving in the government are in many cases the same people who served in governments under Askar Akaev and then, following Akaev's bloodless ousting in March 2005, under the recently deposed Kurmanbek Bakiev. In almost all cases, period in office has been followed by a return to being in political opposition. This begs the question of how this new government will be any different, despite their declarations of intent.

Critics have already emerged and departed to form new political parties. Amongst these is well-known civil society leader Edil Baisalov, who returned from political exile in Sweden to become Head of the Office of the Interim Government. Explaining his decision, he noted the continuation of personal politics in Kyrgyzstan and the lack of any deep and substantive change in how politics is done and by whom. Without meaningful systemic change in practice, and not just in words and legal documents, it is difficult not to conclude that the new government is likely to falter soon and face the ire of the frustrated population.

This possibility points to the second issue: whether the state can find ways to reestablish relations with its citizenry. Here there are both immediate and longer-term problems to be addressed. In the south of the country aid is urgently required to cope with the material and psychological devastation caused by the violence. Tangible steps need to be taken to begin the long and unavoidably painful process of reconciliation between Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities.

In addition, the underlying problems of poverty, corruption and socio-political disenfranchisement must not be ignored or dismissed as unsolvable. The government must rapidly find ways to demonstrate to the population that it is engaging with these thorny issues that currently threaten Kyrgyzstan's future as a sovereign state, and the future of all Kyrgyzstanis. Until progress begins to be made on these matters, no referendum on any issue can help stabilise Kyrgyzstan.

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