

3 Kyrgyz Parliamentarians Arrested Over Mine Protests

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BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan — Kyrgyz police arrested three members of parliament on Thursday who had led a crowd that tried to storm the government headquarters in a protest over a Canadian-owned gold mine.

Wednesday's clashes between police and supporters of the opposition Ata Zhurt party were the most violent in the capital since the April 2010 revolt that ousted then-President Kurmanbek Bakiyev.

The protesters wanted the mine, crucial to the nation's fragile economy, to be nationalized.

The three parliamentarians — Kamchibek Tashiyev, Sadyr Zhaparov and Talant Mamytov — are being held on suspicion of trying to seize power. Prosecutors have 48 hours to decide whether to charge them.

On Thursday, about 1,000 supporters rallied in the main square of the southern city of Jalalabad, their power base, to demand their release. There was no violence.

"Parliament, the president, the government should resign, because they are not resolving the Kumtor issue," one demonstrator shouted through a megaphone.

The attempted storming of Kyrgyzstan's "White House" has also rekindled north-south tension in the country of 5.5 million people, which borders China and has U.S. and Russian military air bases.

Two presidents of the Central Asian state have been toppled since 2005 after attacks on the same government building. Though Bishkek was quiet on Thursday, authorities are wary of protests spreading in the country's poorer and more nationalist south.

Wednesday's protest began as a peaceful rally in favor of nationalizing the Kumtor mine, owned by Canada's Centerra Gold. The Kyrgyz state itself is a 33 percent shareholder in Centerra under a Bakiyev-era contract drawn up in 2009.

Calls to nationalize Kumtor, the largest gold mine operated in Central Asia by a Western-based concern, risk scaring off potential investors needed to revive a shrinking economy.

Prime Minister Zhantoro Satybaldiyev, appointed last month, needs foreign cash to make good on pledges to alleviate poverty and achieve economic growth. Per capita gross domestic product in Kyrgyzstan is less than a tenth of that of its oil-rich neighbor Kazakhstan.

Satybaldiyev visited the Kumtor mine on Monday and gave assurances that the venture would not be nationalized.

Tashiyev, who won 14 percent of the vote and finished third in an October 2011 presidential election, had urged the crowd to follow him during the clashes with riot police on Wednesday.

Ata Zhurt party spokesman Nurgazy Anarkulov said he believed that the detentions were politically motivated and called for mass protests in the south.

"They are true patriots fighting for the interests of the people and for Kyrgyzstan's future," he told a news conference in Bishkek. "We believe the arrest of our leaders is political persecution."

Turdimamat Mamytov, father of one of the three arrested men, demanded the release of his son and criticized President Almazbek Atambayev, who has deepened already close ties with Russia since assuming the presidency in December.

"Such a president should not be in power," Mamytov said.

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