

Protests in Kyrgyzstan continue

Clara Weiss
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Last week's protests against the Canadian-owned coal mine Kumtor in Kyrgyzstan have spread from the northern district Dzhety-Oguz to other parts of the country. Protesters are demanding that the owner, Centerra Gold, fork over a greater share of its profits to fund infrastructure building and finance social programmes. They are also calling for the nationalisation of the mine.

On June 1, demonstrators rallied near the government's headquarters in Bishkek in support of those protesting at the Kumtor mine. Last week, thousands blocked the road leading to the facility, which is the largest gold mine in Central Asia, and cut off its power supply. More than 90 were arrested and dozens injured in a violent government crackdown. President Almazbek Atambayev declared a state of emergency in the region, which was lifted on Monday.

Even as the Kyrgyz government worked to quash the demonstrations in the north of the country, opposition spread to the south. In Osh, a city adjacent to the country's border with Uzbekistan, around 200 protesters have been blocking the highway to the capital Bishkek since June 2. They are demanding the release of demonstrators detained by the government.

Protests have also continued in the Dzhahal-Abad region, where hundreds of demonstrators seized the governor's office on May 31 in an action apparently led by the ultra-nationalist opposition party Ata-Zhurt. The protesters appointed Meder Usenov as the "people's governor". Usenov, a local political figure with connection to various sections of the Kyrgyz political elite, is supporting the call for the nationalisation of Kumtor and the resignation of President Atambayev in order to advance his own political fortunes and gain access to the spoils of state-owned industry.

In an effort to get the situation in the north of the country back under control, the government in Bishkek

has forced the region's deeply unpopular governor, Mirbek Asanakunov, to resign. He was replaced by Tokon Mamytov, hitherto the chief of the border troops.

On June 1, the country's prime minister, Zhan Toro Satybaldiyev, travelled to Dzhety-Oguz. In an effort to appeal to nationalist sentiments, he pledged "to defend the interests of Kyrgyzstan" in relation to the mine and promised an improvement in social conditions in the crisis-ridden district. He claimed that in the future "the people" would control the money from the social welfare fund to which Centerra Gold contributes.

Following the state's violent suppression of the demonstrations and the prime minister's visit, the protests in the north of the country have receded. The Kumtor mine resumed operations earlier this week, with Centerra reporting that the facility is on target to meet its production goals for 2013.

The Kyrgyz state is attempting to use mass outrage directed at Kumtor to its own advantage. Centerra reported on Tuesday that it is currently in negotiations with Bishkek over the possibility of transforming the state's 32.7 percent ownership of Centerra shares into a direct stake in Kumtor, operated through a joint venture agreement. In doing so, the aim of the Kyrgyz government is to ensure an even bigger piece of the gold mine's profits for the national ruling elite.

The recent protests have been preceded by a series of strikes at Kumtor and other workplaces in the Issyk Kul region, the main industrial area in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan, which was devastated by the restoration of capitalism in the 1990s, now ranks among the poorest countries in Asia. The Dzhety-Oguz district, where the protests began, is one of the worst-off in the country, with a poverty rate of 75 percent according to recent World Bank figures. The Dzhahal-Abad region in the south, where opposition has also flared up, records similar levels of poverty.

The protests in Kyrgyzstan follow increasing working class and popular unrest in the post-Soviet sphere in the recent period. Earlier this year, mass protests against social inequality occurred in Azerbaijan. Neighboring Kazakhstan saw workers' unrest in late 2011, which was brutally suppressed by the government. Strikes and protests have also increased in Russia and Georgia.



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