

Kyrgyzstan: the free city of Osh?

On 19-20 August, a rally took place in the city of Osh attended by between 1500 and 5000 people in support of the mayor, Melis Myrzakmatov, who has refused obedience to the central government. He turned down an offer from Bishkek to resign his position for a ministerial post, which means that the rule of Roza Otunbayeva's government over the south of the country (for which control over Osh is an essential element) is still not complete. In most important matters the government is dependent on negotiations with local leaders and is too weak to take control over the south by force.

Myrzakmatov was named mayor of Osh by the former president Kurmanbek Bakiyev at the beginning of this year. Thanks to his strong position in the Kyrgyz community – as well as his own armed squad – he has succeeded in holding onto his office, despite charges hanging over him of being jointly responsible for the June massacres of the Uzbek community, and also his open defiance of the interim government's decrees. In an interview he gave to the Russian newspaper *Kommersant* on 19 July, he stated, "The interim government's directives do not have the force of law in the south."

The case of Osh shows how fragmentary and weak the government in Bishkek's control over the country's territory really is. This is a bad omen for the future of the country and its prospects for long-term internal stability, especially in the context of the parliamentary elections planned for 10 October, which will certainly reinforce the regionalism which is traditionally strong in Kyrgyzstan (especially along the country's north/south axis). <MMat>