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Continued imprisonment of Kyrgyzstans main opposition leader puts the fairness of future elections there in doubt, Human Rights Watch said today.

On Friday, August 15, the Supreme Court of Kyrgyzstan upheld the conviction of former vice president and political opposition leader Feliks Kulov. Kulov, one of Kyrgyz President Askar Akaevs most prominent rivals, is serving a 10-year sentence on charges of abuse of office and financial misconduct that his supporters say were politically motivated.

The Supreme Courts ruling comes at a sensitive time. President Akaev has vowed not to run for office again in the next elections, scheduled for 2005, and many observers are watching the governments treatment of its political opponents as an indication of its commitment to a fair election process.

Feliks Kulov is a political prisoner and should be released, said Elizabeth Andersen, executive director of the Europe and Central Asia division of Human Rights Watch. Kulovs continuing imprisonment is not a promising sign for future elections.

Kyrgyzstan officials worked to exclude Kulov from the ballot in the October 2000 presidential elections. The National Security Service (SNB, formerly the KGB) arrested Kulov, head of the Ar-Namys (Dignity) party, on March 29, 2000 on trumped-up charges of abuse of office related to his tenure as head of the SNB.

A military tribunal acquitted Kulov in August 2000. But the prosecutor's office appealed the acquittal, and one month later just after Kulov announced his intent to run against Akaev in the presidential elections police arrested him again. A court sentenced Kulov to seven years of imprisonment in January 2001; new charges of embezzlement were added in July, and the sentence was increased to ten years.

Kulov is Kyrgyzstans most high-profile political prisoner. In addition to serving as SNB chief and as the countrys vice president, he was also governor of the Chui province, and mayor of Bishkek, the nation's capital. Prior to his arrest in 2000, he lost his bid for a seat in parliament due in part to interference by local authorities.

Kyrgyzstans Manas airbase is host to military partners in the U.S.-led anti-terrorism coalition; the Akaev government has received financial assistance and increased prestige in the region as reward for its cooperation. President Akaev met with U.S. President Bush at the White House in September 2002.

The U.S. government and its partners in anti-terror operations need to remind Kyrgyzstan that respect for human rights and democracy are an integral part of establishing security, said Andersen. Calling for Kulovs release should be part of this process.

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