

CHYNNYBEK ALIEV

ON 5 MAY 2004, Kyrgyzstan celebrated Constitution Day – a national holiday, which, that year, marked 11 years of the independent Kyrgyz Republic. It was also the day that Colonel Chynnybek Aliev was assassinated.

Aliev was born in 1961 in the province of Issyk-Kul. He started his police service in 1981 and was later promoted to colonel. In 2005, he was posthumously promoted to the rank of a police major-general and awarded with the Erdik Order (for bravery).

Aliev headed the Kyrgyz anti-corruption department from 2004. Following a direct order from the interior minister to investigate a series of assassinations, he set up the ‘Sixth Unit’ to investigate grave and serious crimes, including exposing organized-criminal groups.

The 1990s had marked a turbulent period, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Organized-crime networks were becoming increasingly influential, and those who stood in their way risked violence and death.

On this particular day, Aliev’s priority was to join and lead his fellow law-enforcement officers to ensure public safety and order during the national festivities.

The previous day, Aliev had told his pregnant wife, Dilyara, that he was close to cracking a particularly sensitive operation. He would ordinarily never share classified information with his family, but, on this occasion, he seemed unusually anxious. With a sense of imminent urgency and danger, Aliev explained that he planned to show then president Askar Akayev proof that six of the highest-ranking state officials had been colluding with Rysbek Akmatbayev – an alleged organized-crime boss – personally helping him to evade arrest.

Dilyara could not have imagined it would be one of the last things they would speak about. It was clear that the stakes were high in this special operation, but never before in the history of independent Kyrgyzstan had a police officer of her husband's status been assassinated. Later on, four other high-ranking police officers would similarly fall victim to criminal bosses.

Since the beginning of 2004, there had been seven assassinations of businessmen, criminals and one recently retired police colonel. At the time, Aliev and his department were investigating these crimes. The fact that over 30 assassinations had taken place over the previous two years only increased the pressure.

On 16 April 2004, Aliev detained Rysbek Akmatbayev's younger brother, Tynychbek Akmatbayev, a politician – who himself was suspected to be a crime boss and killer. During Tynychbek's detention, Rysbek repeatedly harassed and threatened the colonel by phone.

On 5 May, Aliev received one final call. It was Rysbek Akmatbayev. A few minutes later, the colonel stopped his car at a traffic light. Several dozen bullets fired from an AK-47 rifle perforated the vehicle, 17 of them piercing his body and causing immediate death. Aliev's colleagues who were with him were unharmed.

A few days before his death, Aliev had warned his brothers to avoid visiting their home province. His older brother, Askerbek, shared these details in an interview with a newspaper in 2008. It is telling that no major Kyrgyz paper or media house approached the Alievs for interviews at the time of the murder. Askerbek's house, meanwhile, was burgled – but nothing was taken.



A scene during a hearing of Rysbek Akmatbayev, alleged organized-crime kingpin

The police arrested the bodyguard of Almazbek Atambayev, who would later become the Kyrgyz president. Atambayev at first distanced himself from his bodyguard, but later fiercely defended him and said that they had been together on the day of Aliev's assassination.

Aliev's brother, Askerbek, said in a 2009 interview that the investigation of the murder had been incoherent and extremely slow. A lawyer by training, Askerbek studied the 24 volumes of the criminal case. He found conspicuous mismatches and falsified information, which affected the verdict. He concluded that, in the end, his brother had died because of corruption.

Rysbek Akmatbayev and his cronies were also brought to court. Described as a mafia boss and criminal kingpin, Akmatbayev had a criminal record of violent robbery, manslaughter and possession of firearms. He had previously served a term in Russia's notorious White Swan prison.

When the trial started, however, witnesses and victims refrained from attending the hearing – apparently as a result of extreme pressure and intimidation. Moreover, Akmatbayev and his core team somehow escaped detention, even though he'd been wanted on multiple murder charges since 2001. Before the trial could kick off, two witnesses were killed. One of them was a former police officer who had worked in Aliev's department. The officer had been dismissed for leaking sensitive information to Rysbek Akmatbayev.



Aliev and the vehicle in which he was shot dead

'THE LAWYER REPRESENTING ALIEV'S FAMILY REFUSED TO SUPPORT THE CHARGES'

Only one of the four main television channels reported on the trial. The lawyer representing Aliev's family refused to support the charges. Even the prosecution refused to back their charges against the defendants. This led to all the defendants being acquitted in January 2006.

In the court, Akmatbayev approached Aliev's family, telling them that the then minister of interior had an interest in Aliev's murder. The colonel had been in possession of materials compromising six high-ranking officials. Their names remain a mystery.

Akmatbayev went on to successfully lead an electoral campaign for a seat in the national parliament, a seat previously held by his younger brother, Tynychbek, who had been killed by a rival gang. Rysbek would later also die in a drive-by shooting.

In 2009, the only defendant in the case remained the bodyguard, Erkin Mambetaliev. He was found guilty of three out of eight charges, including assisting in the murder of Colonel Aliev, and sentenced to life imprisonment. However, after the revolution of April 2010, Almazbek Atambayev returned to power. His former bodyguard was tried again, amnestied and released from prison. Mambetaliev became one of president Atambayev's most trusted aides.

In a 2008 interview, Askerbek Aliev said that his brother had been doomed to die early and while serving in office. He recalled that his brother had dreamed of owning a plot of land and some livestock. [He would say], "This is true happiness: to graze cattle surrounded by nature. I envy farmers."