

## Another revolution in Kyrgyzstan?

Kyrgyzstan is the only ex-Soviet Central Asian country to have achieved a measure of democracy, but it is also highly volatile. Massive protests broke out after irregularities in the October 2020 parliamentary elections, toppling the government. Ex-convict, Sadyr Japarov, is now the country's prime minister and acting president. New parliamentary and presidential elections are planned for December 2020 and January 2021.

### Background

Kyrgyzstan is a landlocked, mountainous Central Asian country. Lacking the oil and gas wealth of neighbouring Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest countries in Asia ([US\\$1 309](#) per capita GDP). Due to the lack of local opportunities, many Kyrgyz look for work abroad (mostly in Russia).

Constitutionally, Kyrgyzstan has a [semi-presidential system](#) in which the prime minister heads the government and the president appoints defence and security officials. Until now, the prime minister and president have always been political allies, with the latter playing the dominant role.

Surrounded by authoritarian states, Kyrgyzstan is the most democratic country in Central Asia. [OSCE monitors](#) described the 2011 and 2017 presidential elections, and the 2015 parliamentary elections, as 'lively', 'competitive' and offering voters 'a wide range of choice'. However, they also noted serious shortcomings, such as widespread vote-buying and misuse of administrative resources. The NGO Freedom House [labels](#) Kyrgyzstan as only 'partly free', citing restrictions on the media and opposition.

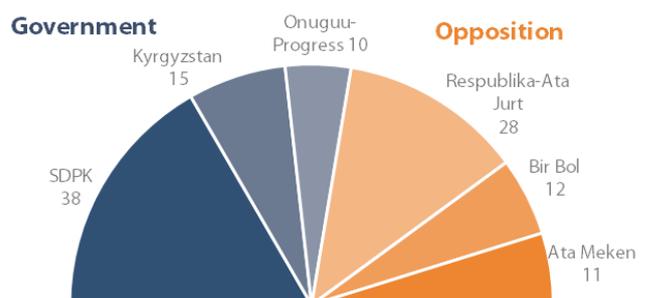
Kyrgyzstan is plagued by periodic instability. Since becoming independent from the Soviet Union in 1991, it has been through two revolutions (in 2005 and 2010) and ethnic clashes (in 2010). The political landscape remains highly volatile, with no fewer than 14 prime ministers since 2010, none holding power for longer than two years. An August 2020 opinion [poll](#) highlighted the potential for renewed unrest, with 53 % of respondents believing that the country was heading in the wrong direction – more than at any time since the 2010 revolution. The poll identified the poor state of the economy (which [shrank](#) by 5.9 % in the first seven months of 2020), the [coronavirus pandemic](#) (which 67 % believe the government handled badly) and endemic corruption as the main reasons for rising discontent.

### Political parties

Most Kyrgyz parties lack a firm ideological basis, serving as mere [platforms](#) for political and economic elites to compete for access to power and resources. Depending on the shifting balance of power, politicians change sides, parties form, merge, split and disappear. The ephemeral nature of Kyrgyz parties is illustrated by the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK). The two most recent presidents, Sooronbay Jeenbekov and [Almazbek Atambayev](#), both came from the SDPK, which was also the largest party in the 2015-2020 parliament. However, in 2020 the SPDK disintegrated after a clash between the two men. Atambayev ended up in jail on corruption and murder charges.

Reflecting the murky state of Kyrgyz politics, as many as [221](#) out of 1 912 candidates on party lists in the 2020 parliamentary elections had criminal records. While there is no doubt that court judgments in Kyrgyzstan are often [politically motivated](#), there is also strong evidence of links between crime and politics. For example, [journalists](#) have accused Raimbek Matraimov – one of the prime movers and financiers of pro-government Mekenim Kyrgyzstan (My Homeland Kyrgyzstan) – of money laundering.

Official parliamentary factions, September 2020



Source: [Jogorku Kenesh](#) (Kyrgyz parliament).

#### 4 October 2020: Parliamentary elections

Sixteen [political parties](#) registered for the 4 October 2020 parliamentary elections. Only four made it past the 7 % electoral threshold for getting into the parliament; in the top three places were Birimbik, Mekenim Kyrgyzstan and the Kyrgyzstan Party, all pro-government, winning a combined total of 107 out of 120 parliament seats. Mekenim Kyrgyzstan and Birimbik were both newcomers to the parliament, although with many Jeenbekov supporters defecting from the former SPDK, they include several [familiar faces](#).

In their preliminary [report](#), OSCE election monitors raised 'serious concerns' about vote-buying. Observers [claimed](#) to have spotted minibuses carrying groups of people to vote in multiple locations. In view of these irregularities, opposition parties [described](#) the elections as the dirtiest in the country's history, and declared that they would not recognise the results of the election.

#### Post-election protests lead to the collapse of the government and chaos

Although allegations of vote-buying are nothing new in Kyrgyzstan, against the backdrop of general discontent they were enough to trigger huge [protests](#). On the day after the election, demonstrators stormed Bishkek's White House, seat of the parliament and presidential administration. They also broke into the national security building, from where they released former President Atambayev (since re-arrested), nationalist Sadyr Japarov, serving an 11-year jail sentence for kidnapping a regional governor, and others. Over 600 protestors were injured in clashes with the police, and one was killed. Electoral authorities annulled the results of the election, and the prime minister, Kubatbek Boronov, stepped down.

In the ensuing chaos, the opposition failed to form a common front. In an unsuccessful attempt to steer the political transition, various parties set up competing [coordination councils](#). Fresh out of jail, and despite the fact that neither he nor his small Mekenchil (Patriot) party had been especially prominent until then, Sadyr Japarov quickly emerged as a front-runner to become the new prime minister. Violent mobs supporting him [attacked](#) a rally led by one of the other main contenders, [Omurbek Babanov](#), a former prime minister, millionaire and runner-up to Jeenbekov in the 2017 presidential election.

After several days of chaos, on 14 October parliament nominated Japarov as prime minister. Despite having previously said that he would stay on to oversee new elections, President Jeenbekov stepped down one day later. Parliamentary speaker, Kanat Isayev, would normally have taken his place but declined to do so, leaving Japarov as both acting president and prime minister. New parliamentary elections are now provisionally scheduled for 20 December 2020 and presidential elections for 17 January. With parliament considering amendments to the electoral law, Japarov says he intends to run for the presidency if the current ban on acting presidents becoming presidential candidates is lifted.

Although the situation in Kyrgyzstan now seems to have calmed down, Japarov's elevation is not necessarily a victory for the rule of law. The new prime minister denies having connections to the underworld, but many observers are concerned by the criminal elements among his supporters.

#### International reactions

After post-election protests in Belarus and fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Kyrgyzstan is the latest ex-Soviet state to face turbulence. Whoever emerges as the country's leader is [unlikely](#) to change the country's close relations with **Russia**, given economic dependence on Moscow. Expressing [concern](#) about the situation, Kremlin spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, warned that Russia, as a military ally of Kyrgyzstan, might have to intervene. However, Russia did not interfere after the 2005 and 2010 revolutions, and it will probably not want to get involved in Kyrgyzstan's messy domestic politics this time either. **China** is Kyrgyzstan's biggest trading partner and [lender](#); both countries have [expressed](#) their intention to continue 'good-neighbourly relations'. While the **United States** [supports](#) a peaceful and democratic transition in Kyrgyzstan, it warns against attempts by criminal gangs 'to exert influence over politics and elections'.

In 2019, the **EU** and Kyrgyzstan completed [negotiations](#) on an enhanced partnership and cooperation agreement; once it is finalised and ratified, Kyrgyzstan will become the second Central Asian country (after Kazakhstan) to have such an agreement with the EU. A 15 October [statement](#) by EU High Representative, Josep Borrell, expresses support for Kyrgyzstan's democratic progress, but notes that Japarov serving both as acting president and prime minister raises 'serious questions' about the division of powers in a parliamentary democracy. Fulvio Martusciello (EPP, Italy), chair of the European Parliament's Delegation for Central Asia, [calls](#) for a democratic Kyrgyzstan, based on full respect of the rule of law.

