



# Kyrgyz Parliamentary Elections Annulled Amid Protests and Unrest

October 9, 2020

The [Kyrgyz Republic](#) (commonly known as Kyrgyzstan) faces political upheaval in the wake of disputed parliamentary elections held on October 4, 2020. As a parliamentary republic that holds contested elections, Kyrgyzstan has long been considered the most democratic country in Central Asia, with a vibrant [civil society](#) and a higher degree of [press freedom](#) than found elsewhere in the region. [Corruption](#) is pervasive, however, and political institutions remain weak. Opposition parties alleged widespread [irregularities](#) in the October 4 vote, including vote-buying and voter intimidation; these assertions were deemed [credible](#) by the international election observers. Mass protests broke out in the capital, Bishkek, on October 5. Overnight, protestors [seized](#) the government building that houses both parliamentary and presidential offices, as well as the headquarters of the State Committee for National Security and the public radio and television broadcaster. Hundreds, including multiple parliamentary candidates, were [reportedly](#) injured in [clashes](#) with police, and one person was killed.

On the morning of October 6, the [Central Election Commission \(CEC\)](#) [announced](#) that the October 4 results had been annulled. A new vote has not yet been scheduled, and unrest has continued. Amid the resulting [power vacuum](#), it remains unclear who is in charge of the country. President Sooronbai Jeenbekov has stated that he is [willing to resign](#) once the rule of law is restored. The [prime minister](#), the [parliamentary speaker](#), the mayor of Bishkek, and other officials announced their [resignations](#), but some have since [returned](#) to their offices. In the early hours of October 6, protestors freed former President Almazbek Atambayev, who had been [sentenced](#) in June to over 11 years in prison on corruption-related charges, as well as several other jailed politicians. Although the term of the current parliament has [not yet expired](#), lawmakers have had difficulty establishing a quorum. Attempts by some Members of Parliament to initiate impeachment proceedings against President Jeenbekov have so far been unsuccessful. Two men were [declared](#) interim prime minister by two different groups of parliamentarians—[Sadyr Japarov](#), a former Member of Parliament who was serving an 11.5-year sentence for kidnapping before he was freed by protestors, and [Tilek Toktogazyev](#), a 29-year-old candidate from the opposition Ata-Meken party. A number of opposition parties have since declared support former Prime Minister Omurbek Babanov instead. After [violent clashes](#) between rival groups on October 9, President Jeenbekov [declared a state of emergency](#).

Congressional Research Service

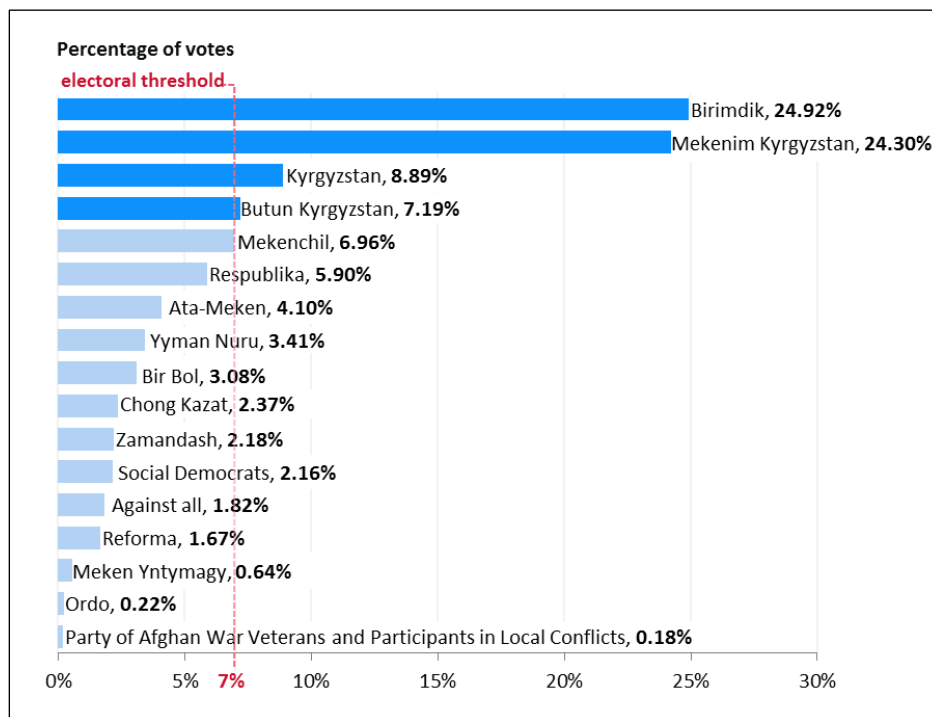
<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN11517

Kyrgyzstan has twice experienced revolutions that ousted authoritarian-leaning presidents, in 2005 and in 2010. A new constitution adopted in 2010 converted the country to a semi-parliamentary system and imposed a one-term limit on presidents, who are elected directly via universal suffrage and serve for six years. The prime minister, nominated by the parliamentary majority and appointed by the president, shares executive power. Kyrgyzstan’s unicameral parliament, the *Jogorku Kenesh* (“Supreme Council”), has 120 members; deputies are elected to five-year terms in a closed-list proportional system. No single party can hold more than 65 seats, and independent candidates are not allowed to run. Kyrgyzstan has one of the highest electoral thresholds in the world—a party must receive at least 7% of the overall vote to secure seats in parliament. Additionally, a party must win at least 0.7% of the vote in each of the country’s seven provinces and the cities of Bishkek and Osh. International observers have criticized both the 65-seat limit and the double threshold as limiting voters’ ability to express their political will.

Because the country’s two largest parliamentary groupings had fractured in recent years, there were no clear front-runners in the October elections. Of the 16 parties that fielded candidates, 5 are new and 3 currently hold parliamentary seats. Nevertheless, the candidates included many veteran politicians reshuffled into new groupings. Although Kyrgyzstan enjoys a greater degree of political pluralism than its Central Asian neighbors, in the assessment of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, “political parties are built around personalities, rather than around platforms, and tend to rely on funding from businesses, thus often reflecting private interests.” Controversial decisions by the CEC concerning party registration raised questions regarding the body’s impartiality before the elections.

**Figure I. Preliminary Results as of October 4**



**Source:** Graphic created by CRS. Data from Kloop.kg.

According to preliminary results issued by the CEC on October 4, four parties cleared the 7% electoral threshold, accounting for about 65% of all votes cast, with 24.9% for Birimdik, 24.3% for Mekenim Kyrgyzstan, 8.9% for the Kyrgyzstan Party, and 7.2% for Butun Kyrgyzstan. Birimdik, Mekenim Kyrgyzstan, and the Kyrgyzstan Party are seen as pro-government. Birimdik was founded in 2020 after the disintegration of the previous ruling faction; its candidates include the president’s brother (under

Kyrgyz law, a sitting president cannot be a member of any political party). Mekenim Kyrgyzstan is reportedly financed by Raimbek Matraimov, a former customs official [implicated](#) in a massive corruption and money-laundering scheme.

In addition to concerns about the integrity of the vote, the post-election protests may reflect broader discontent within Kyrgyzstan. The ongoing Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has strained the country's under-resourced healthcare system and exerted a [significant negative impact](#) on Kyrgyzstan's economy, which depends heavily on remittances from Russia. An August [poll](#) conducted by the International Republican Institute showed widespread dissatisfaction among the Kyrgyz public, with 53% of respondents stating that the country was heading in the wrong direction; unemployment, COVID, and corruption were named as the three top problems facing Kyrgyzstan. Some analysts assess that the elections spurred protests at least in part because they [upset the balance](#) between southern and northern regional interests.

Both [Russia](#) and [China](#), which shares a border with Kyrgyzstan and holds much of the country's foreign debt, have expressed concern and urged a speedy resolution to the situation. Many Members of Congress and other U.S. policymakers have long voiced support for consolidating Kyrgyzstan's gains as Central Asia's only parliamentary democracy. Promoting a more inclusive and accountable democracy is a stated [goal of U.S. foreign policy in Kyrgyzstan](#), and Kyrgyzstan is the only Central Asian country that participates in the [House Democracy Partnership](#).

## Author Information

Maria A. Blackwood  
Analyst in Asian Policy

---

## Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.