

Kyrgyz Parliamentary Elections Annulled Amid Protests and Unrest

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The [Kyrgyz Republic](#) (commonly known as Kyrgyzstan) faces political upheaval in the wake of disputed October 4, 2020, parliamentary elections that favored pro-government parties. 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 international election observers. Mass protests broke out in the capital, Bishkek, on October 5. Protestors [seized](#) the government building that houses both Parliament and presidential offices. Hundreds, including multiple parliamentary candidates, were [reportedly](#) injured in [clashes](#) with police; one protestor was killed.

On October 6, the [Central Election Commission](#) (CEC) [announced](#) that the October 4 results had been annulled, resulting in a [power vacuum](#) as the [prime minister](#), the [parliamentary speaker](#), and other officials announced their [resignations](#). Although the term of the current parliament has [not yet expired](#), lawmakers had difficulty establishing a quorum throughout the week of October 5, impeding attempts by some Members of Parliament to initiate impeachment proceedings against President Sooronbai Jeenbekov and making it legally impossible to appoint a new prime minister and speaker. In the early hours of October 6, protestors freed several prominent jailed politicians, including [Sadyr Japarov](#), a nationalist former Member of Parliament who had been serving an 11.5-year sentence for kidnapping. Although the others were returned to prison, Japarov, who [maintains that the charges against him were politically motivated](#), quickly emerged as a [leading contender for the post of interim prime minister](#). After [violent clashes](#) between Japarov's supporters and rival groups on October 9, President Jeenbekov [declared a state of emergency](#), which has since been lifted. Jeenbekov [announced his resignation](#) on October 15, one day after Japarov was [ultimately confirmed](#) as prime minister. Although by law the presidency should have passed to the new parliamentary speaker, Kanat Isayev, he declined the office, [leaving Japarov as both prime minister and acting president](#). New parliamentary elections will most likely take place on [December 20](#); a presidential election is set to follow in [January](#). Although Kyrgyzstan's constitution bars the acting president from participating in a presidential election, Japarov has raised the possibility of [amending the law](#), which may require a national referendum.

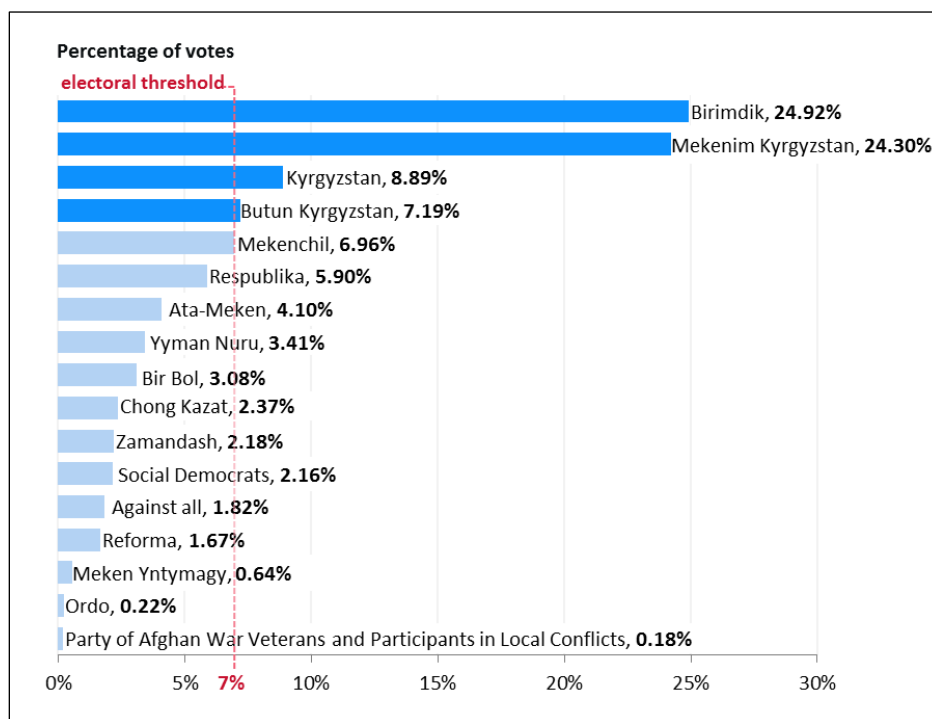
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Kyrgyzstan has twice experienced revolutions that ousted authoritarian-leaning presidents, in 2005 and in 2010. A new constitution adopted in 2010 converted the country to a semi-parliamentary system and imposed a one-term limit on presidents, who 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. The *Jogorku Kenesh* is set to lower the 7% threshold to 3% or 5% in advance of the December elections.

Figure 1. Preliminary Results as of October 4



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

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.

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. Mekenim Kyrgyzstan is reportedly

financed by Raimbek Matraimov, a former customs official [implicated](#) in a massive corruption and money-laundering scheme. It remains unclear which parties will participate in the December electoral contest.

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 one of 21 countries worldwide that participate in the [House Democracy Partnership](#).

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