

Kyrgyz Republic Set to Hold Snap Presidential Election and Constitutional Referendum after Parliamentary Elections Annulled

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The [Kyrgyz Republic](#) (commonly known as Kyrgyzstan) faces political upheaval following the annulment of disputed parliamentary elections that heavily favored pro-government parties. Opposition parties alleged widespread [irregularities](#) in the October 4, 2020, vote, including vote-buying and voter intimidation; these assertions were deemed [credible](#) by international election observers. While no date has been set for new parliamentary elections, a snap presidential election and a controversial constitutional referendum, both scheduled for January 10, 2021, are raising [concerns](#) among some [observers](#) about [democracy](#) and [rule of law](#) in the country.

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. 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](#). 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. [Corruption](#) is pervasive, however, and political institutions remain weak. In light of recent developments, U.S. officials have [expressed](#) concerns about the [influence](#) of organized crime in Kyrgyz politics.

Under the laws in force at the time of the October 4 vote, a party had to receive at least 7% of the overall vote to secure seats in parliament—one of the highest electoral thresholds in the world. 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." According to preliminary results issued by the [Central](#)

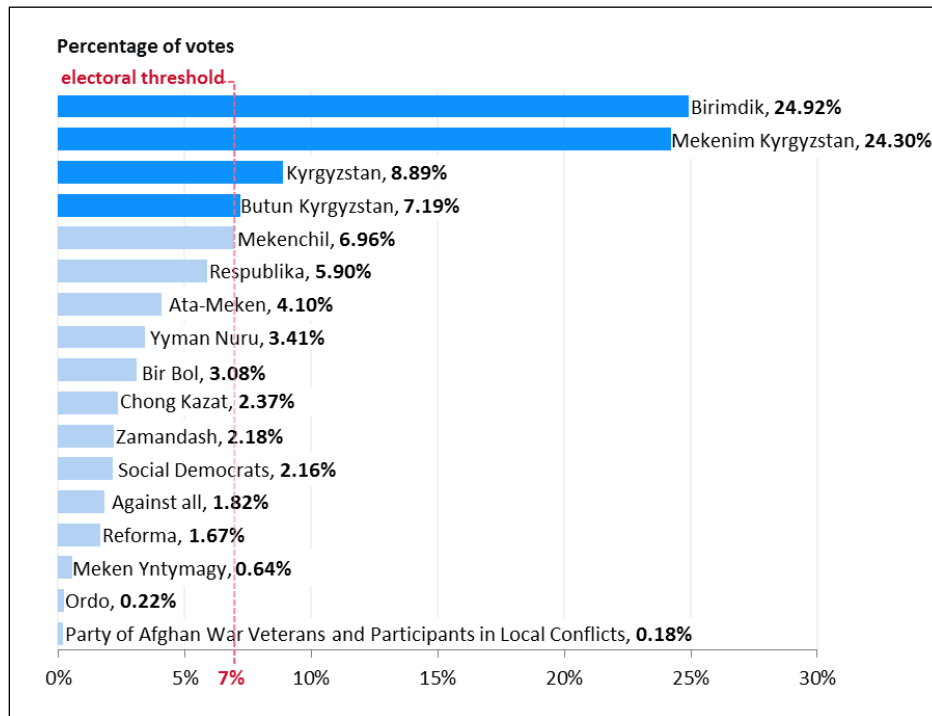
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Election Commission (CEC) on October 4, four parties cleared the 7% electoral threshold, accounting for about 65% of all votes cast (see **Figure 1**). Birimdik (24.9%) had close ties to then-President Sooronbai Jeenbekov, while Mekenim Kyrgyzstan (24.3%) was reportedly financed by Raimbek Matraimov, a former customs official **implicated** in a large-scale corruption and money-laundering scheme.

Figure 1. Preliminary Results as of October 4



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

Mass protests broke out in the capital, Bishkek, on October 5. Hundreds, including multiple parliamentary candidates, were **injured** in **clashes** with police; one protestor was killed. On October 6, the 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**. In the early hours of October 6, protestors freed several prominent jailed politicians, including **Sadyr Japarov**, a former Member of Parliament known for his nationalist views who had been serving an 11.5-year sentence for kidnapping. Although most 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. President 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, he declined the office, leaving **Japarov** as **both** prime minister and acting president.

Kyrgyzstan's CEC initially set **December 20** as the date for new parliamentary elections, with a presidential election set to follow in **January**, but Japarov called for the parliamentary vote to be delayed. On October 22, parliament voted to extend its current mandate into 2021 and to lower the electoral threshold to 3%. Because Kyrgyzstan's constitution bars the acting president from participating in a presidential election, Japarov resigned on November 16. He is considered the front-runner in a field of 18 candidates.

After Kyrgyzstan experienced revolutions in **2005** and in **2010** that ousted authoritarian-leaning presidents, a new constitution adopted in 2010 converted the country to a semi-parliamentary system in

which the prime minister shares executive power with the president, who is limited to one six-year term. After taking power, Japarov and his allies began to push for a constitutional referendum in order to return the country to a presidential form of government. Initially, lawmakers moved to present voters with a new draft constitution, dubbed by critics a “khanstitution” because it would significantly expand presidential power. Ultimately, parliament approved a referendum on whether the country should have a parliamentary or presidential system, to be held on the same day as the presidential election.

Amid these political changes, broader discontent within Kyrgyzstan remains largely unaddressed. 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.

As he moved to consolidate power, Japarov announced his intention to combat crime and corruption. Nevertheless, some analysts speculate that he has backing from organized crime leaders and that the October 22-24 arrests of Matraimov and Kamchybek Kolbayev, who is designated by the U.S. Treasury Department as a key member of a transnational criminal organization, were for show. On December 9, Treasury added Matraimov to the Specially Designated Nationals List under Executive Order 13818, which implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Title XII, Subtitle F of P.L. 114-328), due to his involvement in corruption. The State Department additionally announced visa sanctions against Matraimov and his spouse on December 10. Kyrgyz authorities have since expressed willingness to cooperate with the United States on combatting corruption.

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