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Kyrgyz Republic

Overview

The Kyrgyz Republic (commonly known as Kyrgyzstan) is a mountainous, landlocked country that borders China (see **Figure 1**) and maintains close ties with Russia. Formerly a constituent republic of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan became independent in 1991. 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. In recent years, international observers have voiced concerns about democratic backsliding in Kyrgyzstan, particularly in light of the political upheaval that followed the annulment of the country's 2020 parliamentary elections. Some Members of Congress have also expressed concerns about Kyrgyz government pressure on independent media outlets, including the U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Because Kyrgyzstan is an impoverished country that relies heavily on foreign remittances, the ongoing Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is causing significant economic strain.

Political Background

Government: After Kyrgyzstan experienced revolutions that ousted authoritarian-leaning presidents in 2005 and 2010, a new constitution adopted in 2010 imposed a one-term limit on the presidency and converted the country to a semi-parliamentary system in which the prime minister 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 electoral system.

Recent Political Developments: Kyrgyzstan plunged into political upheaval in the wake of disputed October 4, 2020, parliamentary elections that heavily favored pro-establishment parties. Opposition parties alleged widespread irregularities, including vote-buying and voter intimidation; these assertions were deemed credible by international election observers. After mass protests broke out, Kyrgyzstan's Central Election Commission annulled the results on October 6, resulting in a power vacuum as the prime minister and other officials announced their resignations. Sadyr Japarov, a former Member of Parliament known for his nationalist views who had been serving a lengthy prison sentence on kidnapping charges he maintains were politically motivated, quickly emerged as a leading contender for interim prime minister after he was freed by protestors. President Sooronbai Jeenbekov announced his resignation on October 15, one day after Japarov was confirmed as prime minister. Although by law the presidency should have passed to the parliamentary speaker, he declined the office, leaving Japarov as both prime minister and acting president.

While no date has been set for new parliamentary elections, a snap presidential vote and a controversial constitutional referendum on the country's form of government took place on January 10, 2021, raising concerns about the future of democracy and rule of law in Kyrgyzstan. Japarov was elected president with 79% of the vote amid 40% turnout, lower turnout than in previous elections; 84% of voters supported reverting to a presidential system. The specifics of the planned constitutional reform remain unclear.

Figure 1. Map of the Kyrgyz Republic



Source: Graphic created by CRS

Human Rights: According to the U.S. State Department, major human rights concerns in Kyrgyzstan include torture and arbitrary detention, inadequate judicial independence, severe restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of the press, and corruption. In 2015, the State Department recognized imprisoned activist Azimjon Askarov with its Human Rights Defender Award, leading to significant friction in the U.S.-Kyrgyz bilateral relationship. Askarov died in prison on July 24, 2020, possibly of COVID-19.

In June 2020, Kyrgyzstan's parliament passed a law that would have enabled authorities to censor websites containing information they determined to be untruthful and require internet service providers to turn user data over to government agencies on request. After the bill sparked protests and drew criticism from international observers, the president returned it to the legislature for revision. Draft bills that would impose financial reporting requirements on nongovernmental organizations and restrict workers' right to organize have also drawn international criticism.

Terrorism: Although terrorist attacks within Kyrgyzstan are rare, roughly 800 Kyrgyz nationals travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State or other terrorist groups; more than 200 are estimated to have died over the course of the Syrian conflict. Government plans to repatriate Kyrgyz citizens, primarily women and children, were disrupted by unrest in Iraq and Turkey's October 2019 military incursion

into northern Syria. Some 300 Kyrgyz nationals have returned to the country, and about 50 have been imprisoned.

The Kyrgyz Republic at a Glance

Land area: 199,951 sq. km. (slightly smaller than South Dakota)

Population: 6.5 million (2020 est.)

Ethnicities: 73.6% Kyrgyz, 14.8% Uzbek, 5.3% Russian, 1.6% Ukrainian, 6.3% other (2020)

Languages: Kyrgyz (official), Russian (official)

GDP/GDP per capita (2019): \$8.5 billion/\$1,323

Data from the World Bank and the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic.

Economy

Trade: Kyrgyzstan's 1998 accession to the WTO helped establish the country as a hub for the re-export of Chinese goods. Gold is Kyrgyzstan's main export commodity and is primarily produced by the Canadian-owned Kumtor gold mine, which accounted for about one-tenth of GDP in 2019. The large informal economy is estimated at up to 24% of GDP. Kyrgyzstan has been a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) since 2015, but accession has proven controversial domestically because EAEU membership introduced new regulatory hurdles while failing to confer some of the expected benefits.

Chinese investments: China has supported several large-scale infrastructure projects in Kyrgyzstan, financed primarily through concessional loans, as part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. China's Export-Import Bank owns nearly half of Kyrgyzstan's roughly \$4 billion of foreign debt, according to official figures. The expanding Chinese economic presence in Kyrgyzstan has sparked controversy and protests, which have sometimes turned violent.

Economic dependence on Russia: Kyrgyzstan is among the world's most remittance-dependent economies, with remittances, predominantly from Russia, equaling roughly 30% of GDP in 2019. As of that year, there were an estimated 640,000 to 800,000 Kyrgyz citizens in Russia, accounting for over 20% of Kyrgyzstan's working-age population and rendering the Kyrgyz economy vulnerable to downturns in the Russian economy.

COVID-19: The ongoing pandemic has had a significant negative impact on Kyrgyzstan's economy and is straining the country's under-resourced healthcare system. According to the National Statistical Committee, GDP declined 8.6% in 2020 (previous forecasts had predicted 3.4% growth in 2020; GDP growth has averaged 4% since 2014). The World Bank estimates that remittances to Kyrgyzstan fell 12% in the first eight months of 2020. Additionally, large numbers of people either returning from abroad or unable to migrate for work will likely aggravate unemployment and place additional stress on the country's social services. Kyrgyzstan has received emergency financial assistance from international financial institutions, and the Kyrgyz government has requested debt relief from China. The U.S. Agency for International Development donated personal protective equipment for Kyrgyzstan's healthcare workers

and allocated over \$3.5 million to support the country's COVID-19 response in 2020.

Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations

Foreign policy: Kyrgyzstan maintains close political ties with Moscow and is generally seen as the most Russia-friendly government in Central Asia. The country hosts four Russian military installations, including Kant Air Base. In recent years, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have made strides towards resolving decades-old border disputes, although clashes periodically break out. Tensions on the partially undemarcated Kyrgyz-Tajik border also periodically erupt into violence. Kyrgyzstan is a member of numerous multilateral organizations, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

U.S. Relations: The United States was among the first countries to recognize Kyrgyz independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union. From 2001 to 2014, the United States operated a Transit Center at Manas, just outside the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek, in support of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. U.S. relations with Kyrgyzstan deteriorated under President Almazbek Atambayev (in office 2011-2017), at least in part due to Russian pressure, but relations improved somewhat under former President Jeenbekov (in office 2017-2020). Although security cooperation has waned since 2014, the State Department is seeking to develop bilateral cooperation in combatting terrorism and extremism and promoting regional stability. Other U.S. priorities in Kyrgyzstan include supporting a more inclusive and accountable democracy and improving the country's business environment.

U.S. Foreign Assistance: In 2015, the Kyrgyz government terminated the bilateral cooperation agreement (BCA) that facilitated the provision of U.S. humanitarian and technical economic assistance to Kyrgyzstan. Aid programs have continued, however, with \$37 million and \$31 million allocated in FY2019 and FY2020, respectively, and \$20 million requested for FY2021. According to the State Department, the United States has provided \$1.2 billion in assistance to Kyrgyzstan over the past 20 years. U.S. officials have been involved in ongoing efforts to conclude a new BCA.

Travel Restrictions: In January 2020, the Trump Administration suspended the issuance of most immigrant visas to Kyrgyz citizens as part of Presidential Proclamation 9983, which expanded travel restrictions introduced by Executive Order 13780 of March 6, 2017, citing Kyrgyzstan's failure to comply with information-sharing criteria and deficiencies in the security of Kyrgyz passports. Kyrgyzstan's introduction of biometric passports was delayed in 2019 as the result of a corruption investigation; new passports are slated for issuance in 2021. Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticized the travel restrictions, stating that they caused "significant damage" to U.S.-Kyrgyz relations and noting that more than 80 countries have yet to introduce biometric passports. President Biden revoked Proclamation 9983 on January 20, 2021.

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