



# 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 heavily 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. 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.

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, and 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 had [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 former Member of Parliament 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. Known for his nationalist views, Japarov enjoys the [largest social media following](#) of any Kyrgyz politician. 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

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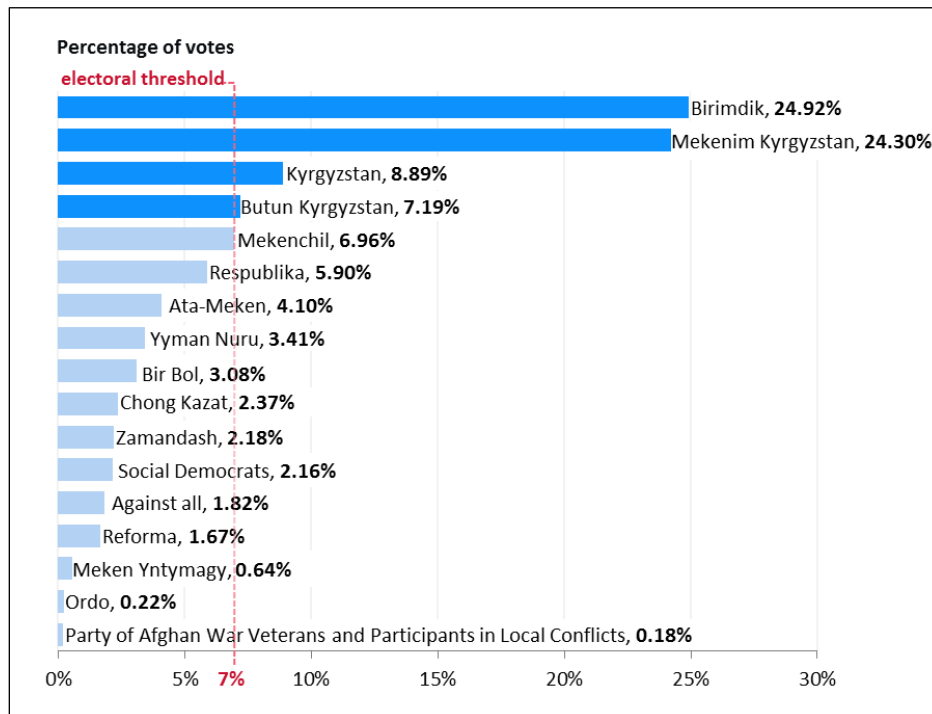
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parliamentary speaker, Kanat Isayev, he declined the office, leaving [Japarov](#) as [both](#) prime minister and acting president.

After Kyrgyzstan experienced two 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 limited the president to one six-year term. 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. Under the laws in force for the October 4 vote, Kyrgyzstan had one of the highest electoral thresholds in the world—a party had to receive at least 7% of the overall vote to secure seats in parliament, as well as 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.

**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.” 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 (see [Figure 1](#)). Birimdik (24.9%) has close ties to Jeenbekov, while Mekenim Kyrgyzstan (24.3%) is reportedly financed by Raimbek Matraimov, a former customs official [implicated](#) in a massive corruption and money-laundering scheme.

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](#). The CEC initially set [December 20](#) as the date for new parliamentary elections, with a presidential election set to follow in [January](#), but Japarov has called for the parliamentary vote to be delayed by several months. On October 22, parliament voted to extend its current mandate into 2021 and to lower the electoral threshold to 3%. Although Kyrgyzstan's constitution bars the acting president from participating in a presidential election, Japarov has stated his intention to run, indicating that he will resign the presidency in December in order to seek office in January.

The post-election protests may reflect broader discontent within Kyrgyzstan, which 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.

## Author Information

Maria A. Blackwood  
Analyst in Asian Policy

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