



Parliamentary Elections in the Kyrgyz Republic

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On November 28, 2021, the Kyrgyz Republic (commonly known as Kyrgyzstan) held parliamentary elections for the first time since the annulment of a disputed October 2020 electoral contest that led to unrest and political upheaval. The November 28 elections were the first to take place under a new constitution that significantly bolsters presidential powers at the expense of the legislature and that has drawn [criticism](#) both for the manner in which it was adopted and for weakening checks and balances in the government.

Kyrgyzstan has been considered by scholars and nongovernmental organizations as the most democratic country in Central Asia for most of the 30 years since its independence. It is one of 21 countries worldwide that participate in the [House Democracy Partnership](#). However, recent events have raised concerns about the future of democracy and [rule of law](#) in the country. In 2021, Freedom House classified Kyrgyzstan as “[not free](#)” for the first time in 11 years.

Observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) deemed the November elections competitive but [noted](#) that “constitutional changes weakening parliament, subsequent extensive legislative changes to key aspects of the elections, a stifled campaign and overall voter disillusionment hindered meaningful engagement.” Some observers have raised [concerns](#) for many about the consolidation of [presidential power](#) in what was formerly Central Asia’s only parliamentary republic. Nevertheless, [populist](#) President Sadyr Japarov has mobilized significant support.

Background: A Weakened Parliament

After Kyrgyzstan experienced periods of political upheaval that ousted authoritarian-leaning presidents in 2005 and 2010, a new constitution adopted in 2010 limited the presidency to one six-year term and converted the country to a semi-parliamentary system. Since that time, Kyrgyzstan’s government has been undermined by corruption, and analysts have raised [concerns](#) about democratic backsliding in the country. According to [Freedom House](#), by 2020, Kyrgyzstan’s legislature had de facto surrendered its constitutionally mandated power over the executive and become a rubber-stamp body. The country experienced further political turmoil following disputed October 2020 parliamentary elections that

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heavily favored two pro-establishment parties. Opposition parties alleged widespread [irregularities](#), including vote-buying and voter intimidation. The Central Electoral Commission (CEC) annulled the elections after mass protests broke out in the capital, Bishkek. Amid the resulting power vacuum, [Sadyr Japarov](#), a former member of parliament who had been serving a lengthy prison sentence on charges he [maintains](#) were politically motivated, quickly became both prime minister and acting president. Upon taking power, Japarov and his allies began to push for a constitutional referendum that would return the country to a presidential form of government. In January 2021, Japarov [won](#) 79% of the vote in a snap presidential election that coincided with a [referendum](#) in which 81% of voters approved the transition to a presidential system.

The new constitution, [endorsed](#) by voters in a subsequent April referendum, significantly bolsters presidential power at the expense of the legislature, transferring several key parliamentary competencies to the executive and reducing the number of seats from 120 to 90; it also allows a president to serve two five-year terms. The new constitution enshrines the [kurultai](#) (people's council) as a body with powers parallel to that of parliament; because the constitution does not clarify the [kurultai](#)'s composition and competencies, some have expressed [concern](#) that it may be used to sideline the legislature. Some observers have [questioned](#) the legitimacy of these constitutional changes, as they were undertaken by a parliament whose mandate [expired](#) in October 2020.

Elections Overview

New electoral legislation signed into law in August 2021 replaced party-list proportional representation with a mixed voting system. Of the 90 seats in parliament, 54 are elected from open party lists in a single nationwide constituency with a 5% electoral threshold. The remaining 36 are elected from single-mandate districts in a first-past-the-post system. Twenty-one parties participated in the elections, and over 300 candidates ran in the new single-mandate districts.

OSCE observers described the campaign as “[subdued](#).” Turnout was at a record low, with about [34%](#) of eligible voters casting ballots (compared to about 59% in 2020). According to preliminary results, seven parties will enter parliament; three are seen as [pro-government](#) and are [estimated](#) to have collectively won about 40% of the party-list vote. One opposition party [passed](#) the 5% threshold, while the remaining three parties are not aligned with either the government or the opposition. With additional pro-government deputies elected in the single-mandate districts, President Japarov is likely to enjoy significant parliamentary support.

A reported technical [glitch](#) disrupted the monitor displaying the CEC's electronic tabulation of votes on election night, fueling accusations from opposition parties that some of their votes had been stolen. Additionally, about 120,000 ballots (roughly 10% of the total) were deemed invalid. Some critics allege that this unusually high figure is a sign of vote-tampering. Others posit that the new [mixed voting system](#) may have led to [confusion](#) among voters. A hand count will determine the final results.

Outlook

Although the vote generally proceeded in an orderly fashion, some [argue](#) that the elections lay potential groundwork for future discontent. Four opposition parties have announced that they do not accept the results as valid, calling for new elections. About 100 protestors demonstrated outside CEC headquarters on November 29. The State Committee on National Security announced the arrest of 15 suspects, including an unspecified number of deputies from the outgoing parliament, in an alleged [coup plot](#) two days before the elections.

Some analysts [posit](#) that Kyrgyz voters may be [drawn](#) to a strong presidency due to long-standing frustrations with corruption and the ineffectiveness of parliament. A public opinion [survey](#) conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in September showed general satisfaction with Japarov's government, with 69% of those polled stating that the country was heading in the right direction (as compared to 41% in August 2020). Additionally, 54% indicated that they were satisfied with the government's Coronavirus Disease 2019 response, the highest figure recorded by IRI in Kyrgyzstan to date. Thirty-five percent of respondents named President Japarov as the political figure they trust most, more than any other politician.

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