

Opposition parties seize power in Kyrgyzstan amid growing geopolitical rivalry in the region

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Opposition forces claim to have seized power over much of Kyrgyzstan's key government agencies and buildings in the capital of Bishkek on Tuesday after protests broke out in the Central Asian country following parliamentary elections on Sunday.

Over 600 were injured and one protester was killed in protests that have seem to have resulted in the removal of President Sooronbai Jeenbekov.

Jeenbekov, who was first elected in 2017, suggested in a phone interview with BBC that he was prepared to step down and "ready to give the responsibility to strong leaders," but did not specify to which specific figures or forces he was referring to.

Jeenbekov has fled his government offices and accused opposition forces of "trying to illegally seize power" in a brief video statement released Tuesday. His whereabouts remain unknown. On Wednesday, the parliament initiated impeachment procedures against him.

Sixteen political parties took part in the country's parliamentary elections held on Sunday. Official results suggested that the majority of votes went to the Birimdik party of President Jeenbekov's younger brother, Asylbek Jeenbekov, and the Mekenim Kyrgyzstan party led by the powerful Matraimov family which has accrued its fortune through its control of Kyrgyzstan's customs service. Both parties are considered allies of President Jeenbekov and favor close relations with Russia.

Jeenbekov and his allied political parties are also viewed by the opposition as favoring the country's agrarian south over the more developed and urban north of the country. The parliamentary elections resulted in giving 100 of the 120 seats to representatives from the south who are aligned with Jeenbekov.

A coalition of 12 political parties refused to accept the results, accusing the government of vote-buying.

Despite accusations of electoral fraud, according to preliminary reports from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the "voting process was generally efficient, well-organized and peaceful." Following the protests on Tuesday, the country's Central Election Commission announced it had invalidated the election's results and that new elections would be held.

Having quickly seized power, the opposition announced it had set up its own coordination council and was beginning to negotiate among themselves who would fill the country's key government positions.

The opposition also released several jailed political figures including former President Almazbek Atambayev, who had been imprisoned on an 11-year sentence for corruption involving a deal with a Chinese company. Sadyr Japarov, who was also released by opposition forces from prison, was named the country's acting prime minister in an emergency parliamentary session on Tuesday.

The US and EU as well as Russia and China have called for a peaceful resolution of the crisis. The US and Chinese governments have urged non-interference from foreign powers. James Dorsey, a senior fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, noted that the warnings from China and the US were above all meant for each other.

Kyrgyzstan, a former Soviet Republic of 6 million people, has been the site of increased geopolitical rivalry over the past two decades. It borders China and is close to Russia and Afghanistan, which was invaded by the United States in 2001.

Prior to the current seizure of power, Kyrgyzstan had seen two of its previous presidents overthrown since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. In 2005, the US staged a "color revolution" in the country, one of several in the

former Soviet Union that were aimed at containing the influence of Russia.

The American press used to tout the country as the United States' closest ally in Central Asia. For many years, Kyrgyzstan even hosted the United States' only Central Asian airbase in Manas. The airbase served as the first and last stop for American soldiers entering and leaving Afghanistan. Approximately 5.6 million foreign soldiers passed through the base while it was in operation.

The base was closed in 2014 following the election of former President Atambayev in 2011. Atambayev favored realigning the country with Russia and increasing economic ties to its neighbor, China, which has become Kyrgyzstan's biggest economic investor and trading partner.

According to Chinese government statistics, bilateral trade amounted to \$6.35 billion in 2019. China holds \$4 billion of the country's national debt. Kyrgyzstan only has a GDP of a little over \$8 billion. The country is also a central component of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative.

Despite the significant economic ties to China, anti-Chinese sentiments in Kyrgyzstan are running high. In 2019, Bishkek became the site of large anti-Chinese protests demanding, among other things, a ban on Kyrgyz-Chinese marriages, and calling for restrictions on the economic influence of China.

The predominantly Muslim country also shares a border with China's Xinjiang region, which is home to China's large Muslim minority of the Uygur.

Many Uygurs are ethnic Kyrgyz and have been imprisoned in concentration camps, a situation that has been exploited by the bogus US-led imperialist campaign over human rights abuses against China. In turn, there is a significant Uygur minority in Kyrgyzstan, which is routinely subject to discrimination.

Following the closure of the US Manas airbase in 2014, Kyrgyzstan joined both the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union and the post-Soviet military alliance of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Russia also opened its own military airbase within the country, forgiving \$500 million in Kyrgyz debt. The US viewed this as further undermining its geostrategic interests in the region as the war in neighboring Afghanistan has been raging on.

Jeenbekov continued for the most part the close relations with China while seeking to make the Kremlin "the main strategic partner" of the country. By contrast, several of the opposition parties that stormed the parliament have been critical of the country's ties to

Russia, claiming they infringed on Kyrgyzstan's "independence."

Reports also surfaced on Tuesday that opposition forces had burned down a Russian-operated factory at Kyrgyzstan's second-largest gold deposit, Jeruy, causing the site's owners to suspend operations.

Following the factory burning, Russia put its military base on high-alert and called on "all political forces at this critical moment for the republic to show wisdom and responsibility in order to preserve internal stability and security."

In addition to the ongoing civil war in Eastern Ukraine, the crisis in Belarus, and the outbreak of actual war between a Russian-allied Armenia and a Turkish-backed Azerbaijan, the crisis in Kyrgyzstan represents yet another major challenge to the Kremlin's geopolitical position in the former Soviet region.

These crises pose enormous dangers to the working class and are the direct result of the Stalinist destruction of the Soviet Union. The restoration of capitalism has turned the countries of the former Soviet Union into hotbeds of geopolitical rivalries and ethnic and social tensions, threatening to engulf the entire region in wars and civil wars.

At the same time, the working class remains mired in extreme poverty, which has only been worsened by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Kyrgyzstan, nearly 30 percent of the population lives below the official poverty line.

Like many other countries from the former Soviet Union, remittances from Kyrgyz workers abroad make up a large percentage of the country's GDP. According to Russian government data from 2017, 623,000 Kyrgyz work in Russia and over one million Kyrgyz are estimated to be working in Kazakhstan, Turkey and the Middle East.

Experts have warned that, due to the pandemic, remittances could fall by as much as 25 percent, with GDP falling by 10 percent and unemployment surging to 21 percent.



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