

Kyrgyzstan: Free elections in a weak state. Little hope of stable government

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On 10 October parliamentary elections took place in Kyrgyzstan, the first since the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev this April. Five parties will enter parliament (a sixth is demanding a recount of the votes); each of them won similar levels of support. Despite general fears of new outbreaks of violence, voting throughout the country went off peacefully, and according to observers, was democratic in nature. The elections completed the phase of the democratic legitimation of the political order which remained after the coup. The most important authority in the country was selected (according to the revised constitution, Kyrgyzstan is a state with a parliamentary-cabinet constitution). But the results of the elections confirm that the political scene has been effectively atomised; this, together with the traditionally strong regional divisions, does not give hope for the creation of a stable government, which will be able to confront the deep internal crisis in which the state has found itself since the coup and the June massacres in the south of the country.

The internal situation in Kyrgyzstan before the elections

Since the overthrow of Bakiyev and the dissolution of parliament, the new government in Bishkek has lacked democratic legitimacy and has been very weak. As a result of the June referendum, the acting prime minister of the interim government Roza Otunbayeva was confirmed as president of the country for a transitional period (i.e. to the end of 2011), and the state's constitution was officially changed to one based on the parliament and the cabinet, with the aim of avoiding future abuses of over-mighty presidential power. At the same time, the central government's control over the south of the country, the home base of the overthrown President Bakiyev, remained incomplete. In June, the Bishkek government was helpless in the face of the massacres of the Uzbek community in the southern regions of Osh and Jalalabad, as a result of which over 400 people died, according to official figures (according to unofficial sources, the real number is several times higher). After these events, on the wave of rising nationalistic sentiments among the Kyrgyz community, the mayor of Osh (the second largest city in the country) stated that the writ of central government did not run in the south. Another very serious problem for Bishkek is the organised crime groups who are strong in the south, and who derive their funds from drug smuggling from Afghanistan, and are interested in maintaining the instability in the country. The socio-economic situation in Kyrgyzstan, which together with Tajikistan is the poorest country of the former USSR, has since April worsened significantly as a result of the internal

instability, a state of affairs not helped by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan temporary closing their borders. The situation in Osh is especially difficult, as in June several thousand shops and houses were destroyed there.

Election results and post-election options

Five parties will enter the 120-member parliament; according to initial counts, each of them will have between 19 and 28 deputies. There will be two groups supporting the interim government and three opposing it. The entry to parliament of a sixth party, which fell just slightly short of passing the electoral threshold (defined as 5% of the total number of those entitled to vote, a figure which has been hard to specify), remains in doubt; they are demanding a recount of votes.

To create a government, a coalition of at least three groups will be essential. The leaders of all the parties have been present on the political scene for a long time, and in many cases worked together during the rules of Presidents Akayev and Bakiyev. So, it seems that none of the possible coalition configurations can be ruled out in advance. At the same time, however, the chances of creating a stable government, in the face of the strength of their mutual animosity, their diversity of interests and deep regional divisions, remain unusually limited. The traditionally strong north/south divisions may be of especially great importance. These had in the past been partially neutralised by the existence of a strong presidential centre which could balance the interests of the elites in both parts of the country. The regional factor would certainly arise if a ruling coalition was formed which excluded the Ata-Zhurt party, which enjoys strong support in the south. The influence of Bishkek in this part of the country would then be reduced even further. A serious barrier on the way to creating a stable majority and normalising the situation in the country may prove to be controversies concerning the recent constitutional changes; some parties (who Russia has been supporting in this matter) favour a return to the presidential system. In practice, it seems unlikely that a strong centre of government which will be able to normalise the situation in the country will have the chance to arise. This means that the state's drift in the direction of decentralisation and the further weakness of its institutions will continue, a process which will be accompanied by further violent crises.

External questions

Irrespective of what form of coalition emerges after the elections, in external matters the new government will in practice be forced to look towards Russia in search of political and financial support, and also for guarantees of security. Russia's influence on the internal situation in Kyrgyzstan is a permanent element of the country's political life, which was very evident during the period of President Bakiyev's overthrow, the chaos after the coup, and the electoral campaign itself. The new government's probable weakness (and also the generally difficult regional situation) will further strengthen the role of the Russian factor. In practice, this may mean attempts by Moscow to force the government in Bishkek to severely limit its cooperation with the West, including terminating the USA's lease of the Manas airbase near Bishkek (or a fundamental change in its conditions), which is now used as a Transport

Appendix

The parties which will enter parliament

1) Ata-Zhurt, led by Kamchibek Tashiyev; won 28 seats (of a total of 120 in the Kyrgyz parliament). An opposition party during the interim government which took power after Bakiyev's overthrow; it is very strongly rooted in the south of the country. Its leaders are linked to Bakiyev and his entourage. The party favours a return to a presidential system. It speaks of a need to emphasise the primacy of the Kyrgyz over the other ethnic groups inhabiting the country. Its leaders blame the June events in the south, as a result of which over 400 people died (mainly Uzbeks), on the Uzbek community itself. It supports conducting a referendum on whether the USA should continue to lease the Manas airbase.

2) the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan, led by Almazbek Atambayev; won 26 seats. One of the parties which supported Bakiyev's overthrow, then participated in the interim government. Supported mainly in the north of the country (it won outright in some regions), and also by the Uzbek community in the south. Before the elections, the party leader won overt support from Russia, and was received in Moscow by the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin.

3) Ar-Namys, led by Feliks Kulov; won 24 seats. Kulov has been a prime minister and a general of the Internal Ministry, and next to Bakiyev was the most important player on Kyrgyzstan's political scene after the 'tulip revolution' of 2005. Before the elections, he also won strong support from Russia, and was met by the Russian President, Dmitri Medvedev. The party is mainly supported in the north of the country (it won outright in Bishkek) and by the Uzbek community in the south.

4) the Republic Party, led by Omurbek Babanov; won 23 seats. It was one of the opposition parties during the interim government's rule. The party leader was a deputy prime minister of Kyrgyzstan before the coup, and is one of the richest men in the country. Before the elections, he was received in Moscow by the head of the Russian President's Administration, Sergei Naryshkin.

5) Ata-Meken, led by Omurbek Tekebayev; won 18 seats. One of the oldest parties in independent Kyrgyzstan; it participated in the interim government. In comparison to other political groups, it has been most outspoken (relatively speaking) about the need to orient the country in directions other than Russia. The party leader is the author of constitutional reforms which Russia has criticised; before the elections he was the target of attacks by Russian TV channels received in Kyrgyzstan.