

Presidential election in Kyrgyzstan

Wojciech Górecki

According to preliminary results, the presidential election in Kyrgyzstan held on 15 October, was won by the former prime minister, Sooronbay Jeenbekov, who had stepped down as the head of government to embark on the election campaign. As the candidate of the government camp he garnered over 54% of the votes (voter turnout was around 56%) and beat Omurbek Babanov (around 33%), the leader of the opposition party Respublika–Ata Zhurt and a businessman. Babanov has also served as prime minister in the past, and once was a close aide of the outgoing president, Almazbek Atambayev. According to the OSCE mission, the election was principally democratic and well-organised. The fact that the head of state is leaving office after having served one term (as provided under the Kyrgyz constitution) and that a new one has been elected in a competitive election is an exception when compared to the situation in other countries in the region.

Commentary

- The election has enabled Kyrgyzstan to maintain its reputation of a democratic country. In the past, the 'will of the people' has been expressed there both at the polling stations and in the streets. Since the first president was toppled during the colour revolution in 2005 and another one after the violent riots in 2010, the political system has been changed from presidential to parliamentary to better suit the special Kyrgyz conditions. The outgoing president initiated amendments to the constitution that will strengthen the prime minister's position (they will become effective on 1 December), and this gave rise to speculations that Atambayev was preparing this position for himself. However, many facts indicate that the incumbent prime minister, Sapar Isakov, might maintain his position (he previously served as the head of the presidential administration), and Atambayev will still have influence on state affairs via the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan which he controls and which has a parliamentary majority.
- The president firmly backed Jeenbekov and made attempts to discredit the opposition candidates, accusing them of staging a coup. He also accused Kazakhstan of supporting Babanov and thus interfering with the country's internal affairs (the main rival of the governmental candidate was received by the Kazakh president, Nursultan Nazarbayev). This provoked a crisis between Bishkek and Astana: the Kazakh side in fact blocked the border with Kyrgyzstan (security issues were the official reason for the dramatic intensification of checks of individuals and vehicles), resulting in kilometres-long queues to the checkpoints. The state administration's efforts were aimed at ensuring the

strongest possible support for Jeenbekov, and some of the votes were bought, which was noted by OSCE observers. At the same time, no serious irregularities were noticed on election day, and Omurbek Babanov recognised the election results. The tension present over the past few weeks is likely to decrease, and the situation will not be destabilised.

- Sooronbay Jeenbekov has announced that he will continue the 'Atambayev line' which includes normalising relations with Uzbekistan. He also presents himself as a supporter of close co-operation with Russia (he was seen as a candidate whom Moscow would accept more readily than Babanov, who is also pro-Russian). At the same time, a few days before the election, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied the information originating from Kyrgyz governmental circles concerning talks on the planned opening of a second Russian military base in this country. By discrediting these rumours, the Kremlin has made it clear that it does not need favours it does not ask for and does not want to be in the pocket of the president-elect.