

Kyrgyzstan: the arrest of a former president

Mariusz Marszewski

On 8th August, the former president of Kyrgyzstan, Almazbek Atambayev, was temporarily detained. His arrest was preceded by two failed special forces raids on his residence which had left one soldier dead and several people wounded (previously, the Kyrgyz parliament had lifted Atambayev's immunity, which former heads of state are entitled to). So far Atambayev has been presented with 14 charges, among them: corruption, abuse of power, organisation of mass riots and a murder .

Commentary

- The arrest of the former head of state has symbolically ended the process of succession which started in autumn 2017. After Atambayev's term in office ended, Sooronbay Jeenbekov was elected the new president (with Atambayev's support). Initially, Atambayev preserved his ascendancy over state matters through the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (of which he is the leader and which has a majority in parliament) and through his supporters who held key positions in the state administration. However, in time Jeenbekov grew more independent, thus depriving his former mentor of all positions and instruments of power. In order to defend himself Atambayev started building a new political environment around himself and including in it particularly people from the North of the country. He also capitalised on a mounting sense of social discontent which had been caused by the consolidation of the power by Jeenbekov, who comes from the South of Kyrgyzstan.
- The division of the country into an industrialised North, which is under greater influence from Russia, and an agriculture-dominated, more religious and ethnically mixed South (with a significant Uzbek minority) plays an important role in Kyrgyzstan's political life. So far the country's presidents have been elected from the North and the South alternately. In the past, the 'will of the people' was expressed both at the ballot box and in the streets. Following the ousting of the first two Kyrgyz presidents in revolutions, a peaceful revolution of 2005 and a 2010 revolution accompanied by riots and pogroms, the political system was changed to a parliamentary one. The fact that Atambayev stepped down peacefully has allowed Kyrgyzstan to preserve its reputation of a democratic state; this reputation is also reinforced by the presence of a large number of civil society organisations and an independent media (when compared to other countries in the region). On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan has not yet succeeded in establishing strong state

institutions.

- A possible sentencing of Atambayev will not rule out his chances of returning to politics – in the context of Kyrgyzstan, incarceration often constitutes a stage in one's political career. The trial of the former president may act as a catalyst for an increased rivalry or even a conflict between the North and the South of the country. On the other hand, it may help expand the influence of the main external political players. Even though both Russia and China have given their support to Jeenbekov, it is in Moscow's interest to preserve the internal political balance in the country (the South is traditionally more pro-Chinese)
- Both players are determined to maintain the country's stability. For Moscow, a stable Kyrgyzstan is important as a participant of its initiatives aimed at integration of post-Soviet political space. For Beijing, it is vital as a country which neighbours the province of the mostly Muslim Xinjiang, and presents the risk of rebellions. Furthermore, both Moscow and Beijing are in favour of limiting the role of civil society (fearing it might become a 'bad example' for their own societies and other countries).