

The 2015 parliamentary election in Kyrgyzstan

1. Background

On 4 October 2015, Kyrgyzstan held its sixth parliamentary election since achieving independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Of the fourteen parties allowed to register and contest the elections, six managed to pass the required threshold and gain seats in the Jogorku Kenesh (national assembly). Attention focused on two issues: the extent of the victory by the Social-Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK); and whether the two new electoral coalitions would be able to pose a challenge to the 'president's party.' The SDPK won predictably and comfortably, albeit not by the expected landslide. The two main challengers performed poorly; Respublika-Ata Jurt (Republic-Fatherland) came second but essentially received the same number of votes Ata Jurt alone had gained in the previous electoral round. Butun Kyrgyzstan-Emgek (United Kyrgyzstan-Labor) failed to pass the 7% threshold required to gain representation in the parliament. The new parliament also includes three parties not previously represented, namely the newly-established Kyrgyzstan, Onuguu (Progress) and Bir Bol (Unity).

The previous parliamentary election was held in 2010 at the end of a dramatic year marked by the ouster of former president Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April, the ensuing collapse of central authority, the June violence in Osh, as well as the approval in a referendum of a new constitution (Fumagalli, 2016 forthcoming). Over the past five years the assembly has gradually become more professionally run, though it is still fractious and unable to establish stable governments (five coalitions have succeeded each other in five years). A presidential election is not due until 2017, when the (single) six-year mandate of President Almazbek Atambayev expires.

2. Candidates and the electoral campaign

Of the over 200 parties registered in the country, 28 registered to contest the upcoming parliamentary elections. Of these, 14 regularly submitted the required electoral lists and paid the 5,000,000 Kyrgyz som (US\$75,000) deposit. The campaign officially started on 4 September and was preceded by a controversy due to the government's move to hastily introduce biometric technology to register voters. Over the summer, in a move designed to avoid losing the crucial support by international donors, controversial legislation – the law against 'gay propaganda' and the 'foreign agents law' – was put on hold. Attempts to introduce key constitutional amendments including one giving central government the power to appoint top judges and local government heads, promoted in a rare moment of unity across all parties in the parliament, were also temporarily withdrawn by the president. Compared to the 2010 campaign, noteworthy changes included the higher registration fee (up from \$7,500) and especially a change in the Electoral Law which raised the threshold parties need to pass nationwide from 5% to 7% and from 0.5% to 0.7% in each of the seven regions and the two cities of Bishkek and Osh. The law allows for quotas for ethnic minorities, women, young people, and persons with disabilities in the party lists to ensure their representation. In order to prevent the formation of one-party regimes, the 2010 constitution sets a ceiling to the number of seats a single party can occupy in the 120-member national parliament. The threshold is important since key constitutional changes require a two-thirds majority. The parliament is elected in a closed-party list system for a term of five years.

The Social-Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) is, at present, the

country's dominant political party. After spending two decades at margins of Kyrgyzstan's political life, the democratic breakthrough which followed the ouster of former president Bakiyev and the election of Almazbek Atambayev to the presidency in 2011 placed the SDPK at the center of the political landscape. Despite the fact that the president had to relinquish his party membership prior to assuming office, the party is closely associated with his own persona. Atambayev's own statement on election day wishing for a strong performance of the SDPK leaves no doubt as to where his own political preferences lie.

Defectors from the Respublika party have over the years founded a number of parties. 'Kyrgyzstan' was established by former Respublika MP Kanatbek Isaev in 2015. With an unclear platform but well-endowed financially (backed by the owner of the largest vodka company in the country), 'Kyrgyzstan' staged a lavish electoral campaign. Bir Bol was created by former Respublika MP Alтынбек Sulaimanov in 2014 and carved out for itself the image of a technocratic party. Onuguu is comparatively older, having been founded in 2012 by Bakyt Torobayev (also a former Respublika MP). It is closely associated with the southern regions of the country. In 2013 it merged with the Unity of Peoples Party (Uluttar Birimdigi) of former Osh nationalist mayor Melis Myrzakmatov (who supported Ata Meken in this latest electoral round, however). The 7% nation-wide threshold for political parties made the formation of electoral coalitions compelling. SDPK's strong competitors in 2010 have gradually waned in recent years: nationalist Ata Jurt, with a stronghold in the south, had won a plurality of seats in the previous election, but suffered several defections, as did Respublika. Even more so, the Ar-Namys party, led by long-time politician Feliks Kulov, was literally deserted by its members. Relations between President Atambayev and Ata-Meken, led by Omurbek Tekebayev (the 'father' of the

2010 constitution) were especially fraught in the months preceding the election, due both to a personal rift between personalities and the pro-nationalization stance taken by Ata Meken in the controversy over the Kumtor gold mine (Fumagalli 2015). Apart from Respublika-Ata Jurt the main challenge to the strong administrative presidential machine was expected to come from the Butun Kyrgyzstan-Emgek coalition. Butun Kyrgyzstan is led by Adakhan Madumarov, a nationalist politician based in the south whose party narrowly failed to pass the threshold to gain seats in 2010. Emgek is led by Askar Salimbekov, a wealthy businessman from the northern regions, and owner of the country's largest market, Dordoi, in the capital, Bishkek.

Novelties in party lists were thus more the result of individual politicians defecting from their own parties in the pursuit of a more certain seat in the parliament. Convicted criminals and shady figures from the business criminal underworld featured on all the main parties' lists. Known Uzbek politicians such as Anvar Artykov (formerly Ar-Namys) and Bakhtiyar Fattakov (head of the and deputy director of the state personnel department) ran under the SDPK and Butun Kyrgyzstan – Emgek party banners respectively. SDPK and Respublika-Ata Jurt placed leading personalities towards the bottom of the party lists, signaling confidence in a strong performance or displaying total contempt for democratic procedures, expecting that anyone will, when needed, make space for key party notables. Prominent Ata Jurt politician Kamchybek Tashiev was removed from the party list by the Central Elections Commissions the week preceding the elections when he assaulted a candidate from the Onuguu party.

Kyrgyzstani politics is not usually fought around specific issues or policy options. In fact, during the campaign the parties did not discuss the most salient issues for ordinary citizens, such as when and how they would begin to reap the benefits of

the membership in the Eurasian Union, or what economic measures would be set in place to address the small Central Asian republic's dire economic conditions and thus begin to slow the migration outflow of citizens from across the republic. Neither were ideas as to how to finally settle the divisive issue surrounding the ownership of the Kumtor mine discussed after so many years of wrangling and politicking. On the whole Kyrgyzstani citizens had the opportunity to have a say on the effects of the 2010 constitution, which introduced a more parliamentary form of government and more generally – if indirectly – on the Atambayev administration. At the same time, chronic instability, endemic corruption and poverty have left voters disillusioned.

At 29% of the country's overall population, Kyrgyzstan's ethnic minorities represent a valuable constituency. No candidate directly appealed to them nor was any concession made to minority groups during the campaign (or after, for that matter). In the south, where most of the Uzbek population (14%) is settled and where inter-ethnic relations remain polarised, nationalist candidates were widely expected to do well among Kyrgyz voters. Traditionally politically disenfranchised and with few political channels to voice and channel demands other than informal ones, Uzbeks have tended to support Ar-Namys; but in light of the party's defections and fledgling support, Uzbek votes were essentially up for grab, most likely shifting towards the SDPK, a party which has been walking a fine line between mainstreaming the nationalist agenda and containing the more radical elements (Butun Kyrgyzstan and Ata Jurt).

3. Results

Kyrgyzstan's elections were free and contested, and election day passed smoothly. Difficulties with registration for the biometric voting system resulted in a smaller number of registered voters compared to previous elections. Turnout was 1,589,479,

that is 57.5% of all eligible voters. This, while overall low, is in line with the turnout of the previous electoral rounds. Regional disparities in this regard were not significant, with a higher turnout in Talas (63%) and lower in Bishkek (52%). Despite the difficulties experienced by the Central Elections Commission's website during election night, results were promptly released a few hours after the polls closed.

Elections returned a six-party parliament (table 1). At 27% SDPK won comfortably. The opposition split into two competing coalitions (Respublika-Ata Jurt and Butun Kyrgyzstan-Emgek) and fared poorly, with the former coming second (20%) and the latter failing to secure the required threshold, receiving just over 6%. The other parties that managed to pass the thresholds were Kyrgyzstan (12.8%), Onuguu-Progress (9.3%), Bir Bol (8.5%), and Ata-Meken (7.8%).

[Table 1 about here]

The SDPK came first in seven out of nine electoral districts. In four of them (Bishkek, Osh city, Osh region, and Naryn) the party received more than 30% of the votes (just over 40% in Osh city). Respublika-Ata Jurt won in the other two districts (Talas in the north-west and Jalalabat in the south), with an especially strong performance in Talas where it gained 37%, receiving three times as many votes as the SDPK. Kyrgyzstan did exceptionally well in the Chuy district (over 17%), as well as in Osh city and Jalalabat in the south (14.5% and 14.4% respectively). Onuguu-Progress gained more than 14% in Jalalabat, with Bir Bol obtaining its best results in Jalalabat and Batken (around 11%). Although it gained more votes than in the previous electoral round, Ata Meken's results were widely seen as disappointing. Butun Kyrgyzstan only received some support in its southern stronghold of Batken (12.4%), Votes in the districts of

Talas and Jalalabat were fiercely contested and the political battle more even, with surprising results (as noted, Respublika-Ata Jurt's success and SDPK's poor performance in the former, and a four-party contest in the latter).

A comparison with 2010 reveals interesting trends (table 2). First, the SDPK significantly increased its presence in the new parliament (38 seats, up from 26 in 2010). Kyrgyzstan, Onuguu-Progress and Bir Bol were not represented in fifth legislature, whereas following the 2015 election the three parties received 18, 13, and 12 seats respectively. Significant losses were incurred by Respublika-Ata Jurt, with only 28 seats in 2015, in comparison to 2010, when the two parties, having run separately, received 23 and 28 seats. Ata Meken also performed poorly, with only 11 seats in 2015, down from 18 in 2010).

[Table 2 about here]

As a result, SDPK's grip on power has consolidated, the party having increased its number of seats by 50%. Together with Kyrgyzstan, pro-presidential parties enjoy a strong base in the parliament. As in 2010, Butun Kyrgyzstan again failed to pass the necessary threshold to gain seats in the parliament (6.1%). Ar-Namys, one of the country's oldest parties, was virtually eliminated from political life as it received only 0.79% of the votes. The SDPK and Respublika-Ata Jurt performed consistently well across the country, in contrast to the 2010 elections, where the former appeared stronger in the north and the latter in the south, possibly suggesting the emergence of a nation-wide political party system (or simply the success of the Respublika-Ata Jurt coalition to bring together parties with a strong base in north and south). Some well-known faces of Kyrgyzstani politics will not be present in the sixth

legislature: Azimbek Beknazarov and Tursunbai Bakir-uluu ran in the ranks of Azattyk (0.3%), while Feliks Kulov's career might be nearing its end with the demise of Ar-Namys.

4. Effects and outlook

In light of the changes introduced by the 2010 Constitution, the results of the parliamentary election are consequential for government formation since the cabinet must rely on a parliamentary majority. Although the parliament is home to six parties, the assembly is less fragmented than the previous one and should, at least on paper, be conducive to more stable majorities.

The electoral results lend themselves to a number of interpretations: first, it the results might appear disappointing for the SDPK. Voters' displeasure with the rushed introduction of the biometric voting system, and the authorities' limited justification of the advantages resulting from accession to the Eurasian Union are possible reasons for the lack of stronger support. At the same time, combining the SDPK's result with that of 'Kyrgyzstan' takes the parties closely aligned to the president to over 40%. If voters have, allegedly, punished the president's recent self-assured statements, they did not vote for change either.

Second, the results have provided the president with a more coherent majority in the parliament. As a result, not only coalition-building should be easier than in recent past, but governability should also be enhanced. At the same time the personal feuds between the SDPK on the one hand, and Ata Meken on the other, will have to be reconciled if the two parties are to co-exist in government.

Third, the oft-debated north-south divide was less evident in this electoral round, possibly heralding the final making of a nation-wide party system. The SDPK came first in Bishkek, Naryn and Chuy in the north, and Osh, Batken and Osh city in the south. Onuguu-Progress's performance was stronger in the south (it is seen as a southern party), especially in Jalalabat. With regard to the rise of nationalism, one of the biggest surprises was the extremely poor performance of nationalist Butun Kyrgyzstan (this time in coalition with Emgek, a little known political formation). The other contender, consisting of the electoral coalition between Respublika and Ata Jurt performed relatively better, despite failing to match the 2010 result where Ata Jurt led the race and then-new Respublika came third. Although each party fielded minority candidates, representation in the parliament remains little more than symbolic, with three Russians, one Uyghur and three Uzbeks sitting in the 120-seat parliament.

Despite an eventful year in foreign policy, marked by Bishkek's accession to the Moscow-led Eurasian Union in August and the souring of relations with the United States, foreign policy featured remarkably little in local politics. Virtually all parties contesting the elections presented themselves as pro-Russian. The outcome should please Russia, and will have no foreign policy implications.

In the 2010-2015 legislature the five coalitions that have succeeded each other have been unable to achieve anything meaningful, hostage to the Kumtor gold mine controversy. Relatively swift post-election negotiation ended in the formation of a coalition comprising, as expected, the SDPK and Kyrgyzstan, alongside Ata Meken and Onuguu-Progress (24.kg, 2015). On 5 November, the parliament approved the formation of a new coalition government by Temir Sariyev (who was also prime minister in the previous government), with the support of 80 MPs. The constitution

mandates that an official opposition must be formed; this currently includes Respublika-Ata Jurt and Bir Bol. The alignment between president and parliament removes any alibi for President Atambayev, who has to deliver measures aimed at improving the economic conditions of his fellow Kyrgyzstani citizens. In a visit to the parliament on 6 November, President Atambayev expressed his preference for constitutional change in favor of a fully parliamentary one (the current one is semi-presidential, Eurasianet, 2015).

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Table 1. The 2015 Parliamentary Election Results (voters and percentages)

	Votes (overall)	% (overa ll)	Bishk ek	Chu y	Tala s	Issyk- kul	Nary n	Osh city	Os h	Jalalab at	Batk en
SDPK	431,771	27.5	30.4	29. 1	12.3	25.7	30.4	40.1	35. 5	14.4	29.8
Respublika-Ata Jurt	316,372	20.2	20.6	19. 6	37.3	21.7	12.8	16.9	16. 3	22.6	18.4
Kyrgyzstan	203,383	13.0	8.6	17. 1	13.0	11.3	16.1	14.5	12. 4	14.4	7.1
Onuguu-Progress	143,475	9.3	6.5	8.6	9.3	7.7	6.4	7.5	9.5	14.1	7.6
Bir Bol	133,800	8.5	6.5	7.2	3.8	6.5	2.4	8.1	10. 2	11.4	11.9
Ata Meken	122,152	7.0	7.8	6.5	13.8	7.2	10.5	5.9	6.6	8.5	6.8
Butun Kyrgyzstan- Emgek	96,751	6.1	7.9	4.4	2.6	4.9	8.2	2.6	4.4	7.3	12.4
Ar-Namys	12,496	0.7	1.1	0.5	1.6	0.3	0.3	0.6	0.3	1.5	0.6
Others	199,256	7.7	10.6	7	6.3	14.7	12.9	3.8	4.8	5.8	5.4
TOTAL	1,659,456	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	10 0	100	100

Source: Kyrgyz Respublikasynyn Zhogorku Keneshinin Deputattaryn Shayloo (Central Election Commission) (<http://ess.shailoo.gov.kg/ServiceJSP.do>)

Table 2. Jogorku Kenesh seats

	2015	2010	Diff.
SDPK	38	26	+12
Respublika-Ata Jurt	28	51*	-23
Kyrgyzstan	18	0	n.a.
Onuguu-Progress	13	0	n.a.
Bir Bol	12	0	n.a.
Ata-Meken	11	18	-7
Ar Namys	0	25	-25
TOTAL	120	120	

Source: Central Election Commission, Kyrgyz Republic.

* Respublika and Ata Jurt ran separately in 2010, receiving 23 and 28 seats respectively.

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Highlights

- The election returned a six-party parliament
- It resulted in the victory of pro-Atambayev political parties, such as the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan and Kyrgyzstan
- The nationalist opposition performed poorly
- A more cohesive parliamentary majority should enhance governability