

# Kyrgyz Election Shows There Is Another Way Forward in Central Asia

Kyrgyzstan's contested presidential election campaign mirrored the complexities of the country's brittle democracy. The new president will need a deft touch for the challenges ahead.

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Kyrgyzstan looks set to conduct the first democratic transfer of power in the Central Asian region. On 16 October, the Kyrgyz Central Election Commission announced preliminary results revealing that the candidate of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK), Sooronbay Jeenbekov had won 54.3 per cent of the votes cast in the country's presidential election, while his chief opponent, businessman Omurbek Babanov received 33.4 percent. After a campaign marred by mud-slinging and provocations, this clear majority confounded expectations and widespread belief that a close vote between these two former prime ministers would necessitate a run-off.

The peaceful and measured response to the unexpected results so far is broadly encouraging. Babanov, who gained nearly 90 per cent of the votes cast in his native Talas Province but lost the support of the south of the country, appears to have lost gracefully, suggesting a compromise deal might be taking place behind the scenes. Babanov has highlighted the importance of stability and urged his supporters not to succumb to provocations. Also fully aware of the potential for instability, outgoing president Almazbek Atambayev eliminated some competition through questionable

judicial means in the run-up to the elections while co-opting Babanov supporters with offers of senior government positions.

Several factors influenced Atambayev loyalist Jeenbekov's victory besides his popularity in the south, where he represents one of the most powerful patronage networks. Not least was indirect support from the Kremlin and the usage of vast administrative resources. His election also constitutes a vote for the stability maintained by Atambayev over the last six years. After two revolutions and several incidences of civil and ethnic conflict over the last decade, 'revolution fatigue' among the electorate prevents further civil unrest.

But despite these caveats, this seemingly peaceful transfer of presidential power demonstrates that Kyrgyzstan has the ability to put its turbulent past behind and to push forward with much needed reforms. It also shows neighbouring regional leaders that their model, a carefully choreographed transfer of power, is not the only option.

### **Can the new president lead?**

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe praised the orderly transfer of power but noted cases of misuse of public resources and pressure on voters and vote-buying. Turnout at 56 per cent of a 3 million-strong electorate was respectable, but Jeenbekov gained fewer votes percentage-wise than any other previous president of Kyrgyzstan. An underlying widespread perception that he did not legitimately win the election would be dangerous, fomenting opposition and stripping Jeenbekov of the legitimacy needed to undertake vital reforms.

A lacklustre politician, Jeenbekov was lent support by Atambayev, whose mandate was already waning, to win the elections. In Kyrgyz politics, allies quickly turn into opponents and Jeenbekov already lacks the support of some members of the SDPK and the elite. Furthermore, under the new constitution, some of the president's powers have been transferred to the prime minister – another Atambayev loyalist, Sapar Isakov – and to a lesser extent the parliament. Atambayev has a messianic complex that he has been sent to save Kyrgyzstan; some observers suggest that he will attempt to take the prime ministerial position when his term ends.

Jeenbekov faces myriad domestic challenges. While Atambayev has brought relative stability to Kyrgyzstan his rule has been characterised by the failure of judicial reform, cadre politics and corruption, as well as increased populism and social demagoguery. Civil society has been weakened and economic migration has increased. These policies have hindered Kyrgyzstan from evolving into a fully-fledged liberal democracy.

On the one hand, Kyrgyz society has developed a democratic maturity and, uniquely in Central Asia, demands fair and free elections. On the other, the leverage of regional clans over the distribution of financial and administrative resources had more impact on election results than the popular appeal and campaign quality of candidates.

Jeenbekov's challenge is to introduce reforms, including anti-corruption reform – one of the core pillars of his campaign platform. Tariff reform in the electricity sector is also imperative as are reforms to the health, education and the judicial systems.

Jeenbekov's foreign policy decisions will be equally challenging but some discontinuity from his predecessor's policies could reap positive rewards. His immediate objective should be repairing relations with Kazakhstan after they soured dramatically several weeks ago following Atambayev's inflammatory comments about Kazakhstan meddling in the elections. The border closure with Kazakhstan has exacerbated the public debate about the practical benefits of Kyrgyzstan's membership of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, which Atambayev took the country into in 2015. A recent Gazprom deal suggests that relations with Moscow are largely on track but maintaining them will be a priority for Jeenbekov.

Simultaneously he will need to work harder on improving relations with other crucial partners China and Turkey. The EU's mandate to negotiate a comprehensive agreement with the Kyrgyz republic will remain a carrot for judicial, democratic and human rights reform but lacks the importance with which Kyrgyzstan regards Russia or China.

### **A unique country**

The very fact that the presidential race was so unpredictable and that Atambayev stood by the 2010 Kyrgyz constitution and left the presidency after one term is remarkable in the Central Asian region. Furthermore, the country appears to be accepting Jeenbekov's victory. With its move into Russia and China's orbit, Kyrgyzstan is far from becoming a liberal island in a very illiberal region – but it has marked out the possibility of a different path.