

Kyrgyz Parties in Flux Ahead of Election

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Main political groupings go through mergers and defections, but the essence of politics remains the same.

As Kyrgyzstan's political parties jostle for position in the October 4 parliamentary election, surprising new alliances have grown up, in some cases between formerly bitter rivals.

Although the landscape of coalitions and relationships looks different, many commentators say nothing has really changed – personality politics counts for more than real issues.

Of the 14 parties fielding candidates, the real battle involves those represented in the current legislature – the Social Democrats, Ata Meken, Ar Namys, Ata Jurt and Respublika.

At the moment, no party has a clear majority, and the Social Democrats with 26 seats out of 120 in the chamber have been governing in coalition with Ar Namys (25 seats) and Ata Meken (18).

Apart from showing that no party is dominant, these numbers mean less and less as political alliances shift and individual politicians leave one party and join another, or form new ones.

Ata Jurt has the most seats, 28, but was ejected from the ruling coalition in October 2011, and its leader Kamchybek Tashiev was jailed for a few months. It has now merged with Respublika (currently holding 23 seats) to form Respublika Ata Jurt, an amalgamation that looks decidedly odd given a history of mutual accusations of wrongdoing.

The merger may be about winning votes nationwide. Ata Jurt's populist nationalism is rooted in the south of the country, whereas Respublika, whose leader Omurbek Babanov is a former prime minister, appeals to the business community and its support is now limited to the north, after a number of defections.

Two former members are hoping to take Respublika's southern voters with them to the new political parties they have set up. Altynbek Sulaimanov and Bakyt Torobaev now lead parties called Bir Bol and Onuguu, respectively.

Another merger involves Butun Kyrgyzstan, which just missed winning enough votes to get into parliament in the 2010 polls. Its leader, veteran politician Adakhan Madumarov, has gone for an alliance with the Emgek party, whose head is a leading businessman.

The Social Democrats remain a leading force, since their head is President Almazbek Atambaev. While they lack a majority, they are hoping to carry on as before.

"Our party is seen as a stabilising force, since people have realised that a quiet life is better than coups, demonstrations and revolutions," Social Democratic parliamentary leader Chynybay Tursunbekov told IWPR.

However, the party's ability to pull together a workable governing bloc is now in doubt because of a growing rift with long-term coalition Ata Meken.

Atambaev and Ata Meken leader Omurbek Tekebaev were allies in the movement that overthrew President Kurmanbek Bakiev in April 2010, and their parties then worked closely together in subsequent governments.

Recently, however, relations have got so bad that Tekebaev has compared Atambaev to Bakiev and accused him of displaying similar dictatorial tendencies.

"The main feature of the current political system is a government beyond control, which gives members of the ruling group a sense of impunity and entitlement," Tekebaev said at a party conference earlier this month. "In 2010, we started fighting against the political system to prevent a single family from entrenching its rule, but unfortunately we failed, and now the country is dominated by single-party rule."

Friction between the two parties was evident in early September, when the authorities in the capital Bishkek stopped Ata Meken campaigners hanging up banners in the streets. Kyrgyzstan's election body later said the mayor's office had broken the law and ordered it to return confiscated campaign materials and pay damages.

Tekebaev has accused the Social Democrats of promoting "clone parties" to bar the way for genuine political opposition.

“As soon as they get into parliament, they will group together. That means the system won’t function. It will only do so when strong, independent parties arrive,” Tekebaev said at a recent press conference, adding that most of those campaigning for seats were just “trying to serve whoever has most power”.

Tursunbekov counters that if Tekebaev’s accusation is true, Ata Meken should already be in opposition rather than remaining in the governing coalition.

“I don’t believe it is honest to stay in coalition with the Social Democratic Party while accusing it of cloning parties,” he said to IWPR.

Tursunbekov said it was untrue that the Social Democrats had monopolised power, when they had actual handed out cabinet positions to other parties.

Ata Meken’s hostility to the Social Democrats was further underlined when it chose the former mayor of Osh, Melis Myrzakmatov as one of its top candidates. Myrzakmatov was seen as a thorn in the government’s flesh and was **ousted as mayor** in December 2013. He was later convicted of financial wrongdoing during his time as mayor, and the election body has therefore refused to allow his name to go forward.

Ata Meken has also recruited other figures who are at odds with Atambaev, including former chief prosecutor Aida Salyanova and recently dismissed constitutional judge **Klara Sooronkulova**.

At the same time, Ata Meken has also suffered significant defections. Two of its parliamentary members, Ravshan Jeenbekov and Omurbek Abdrahmanov, have moved to Ar Namys. This comes as another surprise, as both are considered liberal pro-Westerners, whereas Ar Namys is seen as Moscow-oriented.

Abdrahmanov told IWPR why the move made sense to him and Jeenbekov.

“We think it is essential to develop a parliamentary system government, and Ar Namys is the only party that promotes these principles. As for the criticism that Kulov supported Kyrgyzstan’s accession to the Eurasian Economic Union and we didn’t, I can say that I’m still against it. But 95 per cent of the people and legislators are for it. Politics is the art of the possible. Now that we have taken this step, we must consider how we can best benefit from accession and expand the market for our manufacturers and investors.”

Party leader Felix Kulov similarly pointed up the common ground rather than differences.

“Some people label politicians. I get called pro-Russian, while Ravshan Jeenbekov, Omurbek Abdrahmanov and Kubatbek Baybolov are described as pro-Western. Yes, they have democratic views on human rights, freedom, and the decentralisation of power. I too have these views, so our interests coincide,” he told IWPR.

Kulov denies that his party is pro-Russian.

“We are above all a party of Kyrgyzstan that stands for the national interest. However, we think we should be friendly with all countries,” he told IWPR. “We should never forget that about one million of our compatriots are working in Russia, and 400,000 of those have become Russian citizens. These are geopolitical issues which we cannot ignore.”

Elmira Nogoibaeva, head of the Polis Asia think-tank, argues that all the main parties have shown themselves to be pro-Moscow by backing entry to the Eurasian union.

“In 2015, Kyrgyzstan is the most dependent it has been in its entire history as an independent country. That is demonstrated perfectly by our parties,” she said.

Nogoibaeva says that even Ata Meken, which previously opposed membership of the Eurasian Economic Union, is backing it now that Kyrgyzstan has joined.

At the same time, she said, Ata Meken has emerged as Atambaev’s principal opponent on domestic policy matters.

“For now, Ata Meken is the only party that openly voices criticism of the president and his party. The other leaders and parties are more circumspect, even though they made sharply critical remarks about Atambaev and the Social Democrats in earlier elections and during the current parliament,” she said.

Medet Tiulegenov, a politics lecturer at the American University of Central Asia, says that as they go into this election, Kyrgyzstan’s parties have yet to formulate clear policies.

“There’s a certain vagueness about the programmes and ideas of all the parties. As a rule, these are groups of people whose interests are purely pragmatic, and whose main aim is to get elected,” he said. “It’s going to take a few more elections before parties consolidate around ideological matters.”

Tiulegenov predicts that the Social Democrats will win votes simply because their leader is president and

thus an easily identifiable leader.

“Recent studies have shown that the majority of voters don’t know anything about the parties that are standing. In cases like that, people generally vote for representatives of the authorities,” he said.

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