

Kyrgyzstan: Atambaev Detained, But Not Out of the Game

Author: [Natalia Lee](#)

Experts say arrest only marks a temporary truce in an ongoing power struggle.

Kyrgyzstan's former president Almazbek Atambaev remains in pre-trial detention after a dramatic arrest on corruption charges which analysts view as the latest stage in a politically motivated battle with his successor.

Atambaev is due to appear in court on August 26, but experts believe he is far from ready to admit defeat in an ongoing power struggle with current leader Sooronbay Jeenbekov.

When elected in 2017, Jeenbekov was initially viewed as Atambaev's political heir, but tensions have been simmering between the two men.

In two days of drama this month, one man was killed and some 90 people injured. This current crisis began in early June, when Atambaev told supporters Bishkek rally that charges against him relating to the Batukaev case were intended to divert attention from government corruption.

He derided the parliament as "greenhorns" in thrall to Jeenbekov. Three weeks later, deputies voted to lift his immunity and the former president was charged with various counts of corruption, including involvement in the early 2013 release of crime boss Aziz Batukaev's.

Dozens of supporters then began to arrive Atambaev's Koi-Tash home amid warnings that he was to be charged for corruption. The former president described them as voluntary defenders, warning that he himself was armed.

"I have an honorary weapon and I'll shoot back if they come to detain me. I am telling this to the guys that will come in for me. They are complying with an illegal order," Atambaev said at a press conference at Koi-Tash on June 27.

Later in July, barricades were set up around the house. The first attempt to detain Atambaev took place on the night of August 7 when, according to the State Committee for National Security (GKNB), a special forces task force using rubber bullets were met with live fire from Atambaev's supporters. An assistant commander was killed and six soldiers taken hostage.

The following day, police made a second attempt to storm Atambaev's mansion, which led to the former president's negotiated surrender. As he was being questioned at the GKNB, supporters gathered in Ala-Too Square in Bishkek, blocking the main street before marching on the parliament building. Close to midnight, the police began to disperse the protesters with sound bombs.. According to Atambaev's lawyer Sergey Slesarev, the ex-president was charged with corruption in the Batukaev case.

On August 8, Jeenbekov held a closed meeting of the Security Council and subsequently made an official statement at an extraordinary session of parliament.

"This is not a confrontation between two persons," Jeenbekov said. "This is a fierce struggle against... the pinnacle of corruption in the country, against the investigation within the framework of legislation and ensuring fair justice."

However, experts see the situation as a clear power struggle. Conflict expert Tatiana Vygovskaya-Kamenko said that this was entirely down to personality rather than policy.

“Unfortunately, this conflict is no longer about politics, as neither the new leader nor old propose innovation and change,” she said. “People do not fight for the new initiatives, management styles, participation; they simply support or do not support one of the two leaders, who fight each other.”

Political analyst Medet Tyulegenov agreed that the events were highly embarrassing for the government, especially considering that a handful of Atambaev supporters in Koi-Tash managed to see off the special forces.

“A person with few supporters seems to show how inefficient the state machinery is in terms of law enforcement. This is... the indicator of the overall environment in the country,” Tyulegenov said.

An online [petition](#) has called for parliament to be dissolved, arguing that only a new administration with moral authority and public support can resolve the situation.

“The current parliament lost the nation’s trust and does not represent its interests,” wrote its author, entrepreneur Chyngyz Makeshov. “Kyrgyzstan vitally needs new political forces. The parliament needs to become a place for the confrontation of ideas and values.”

ONGOING TENSIONS

Divisions between the two leaders began to grow soon after Jeenbekov’s election, when he began to make dramatic changes, criticising the courts and law enforcement agencies for their ineffective fight against corruption. In just a few months, he replaced half the government – including the prime minister and vice-prime ministers - the heads of the GKNB, several judges and the prosecutor-general.

Atambaev, who had announced upon his resignation that he was retiring from political life, changed his mind and became chairman of the Social Democratic Party, a role he had served in before his presidency.

“The fact that the situation would be exactly as it is now was clear right away,” Vygovskaya-Kamenko said, claiming that Jeenbekov’s reforms had been politically motivated.

“The authorities started to detain Atambaev supporters on cooked-up charges,” she continued, explaining that this preamble had given the former president enough time to make extensive preparations if the worst came to the worst.

“It took them too long to lift immunity from the ex-president,” Vygovskaya-Kamenko argued. “It took them too long to make charges against the ex-president, which they renounced from time to time. Atambaev saw this overt threat to himself and didn’t waste this time.”

The events in Koi-Tash and Bishkek took place amid the backdrop of the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council session in Cholpon-Ata on August 9.

As the prime ministers of Eurasian Union member states arrived in Kyrgyzstan, Russian government head Dmitry Medvedev said that while Atambaev’s arrest was a domestic matter, “Russia could not treat what happens indifferently”.

“In my opinion, it is obvious that Kyrgyzstan has already reached its limit of revolutions in the twenty-first century,” Medvedev said, according to the TASS news agency. “It would be very bad if events of this kind led to political, economic instability in the country.”

Three weeks prior to the events, Atambaev left from the Russian air force base in Kant on a private plane to Moscow to meet Vladimir Putin. Many analysts believed that these talks were a sign that Russia was acting as a mediator in the conflict between Atambaev and Jeenbekov.

“I think the Kyrgyz authorities are now bargaining with the Russians,” analyst Elmira Nogoibaeva said. “Probably, the Kremlin still keeps personal agreements with Atambaev and does it not because of being good friends.”

She added that the longer the conflict lasts, the more public distrust towards the current government will grow. This would ultimately favour the previous president.

“I think the conflict has not ended, it will continue, especially if Atambaev is in Kyrgyzstan,” she said. “[Atambaev] may slowly form a halo of the victim and the martyr, and this is a very common image, so I think that the conflict is not over yet. The longer it drags on, the more public opinion will lean in his direction.”

Nogoibaeva concluded that Atambaev’s apparent climbdown was just a tactical move, adding, “This looks more like a temporary truce. I think more wildcards will appear.”

IWPR-trained journalist Erkina Asanbaeva also contributed to this report.

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Focus: From the Borderland to the

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