

## **New Party May Dominate Kyrgyz Parliament**

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Critics of recent changes warn that Kyrgyzstan could end up with a one-party legislature that exists solely to rubberstamp the president's decisions.

Changes to the way political parties contest for parliamentary seats in Kyrgyzstan could result in a political system like those of Kazakhstan and Russia, where pro-presidential parties dominate and there is no effective opposition.

On October 21, voters in a national referendum approved a new constitution which strengthens the role parties play in parliament and government. Announcing the results the next day, President Kurmanbek Bakiev dissolved the current legislature and called an election for December 16.

The new-shape legislature will have 90 seats, all filled by proportional representation, using party lists. The current parliament was elected on a first-past-the post basis, a system which has been criticised for encouraging vote-rigging and allowing local strongmen to win easily.

In anticipation of the change, Bakiev announced the creation of a new party, the Ak Jol People's Party, on October 15, saying that although Kyrgyzstan had some 100 parties already, many of them were so small as to be insignificant.

"Very few of them take on any responsibility – at best, they just criticise the authorities," he said. "As yet there hasn't been any party that sets about doing actual work. So I have taken a decision myself to create a new political force, a party of construction, responsibility and action."

The day after he was elected head of Ak Jol on October 16, Bakiev laid down his powers as party chairman temporarily, explaining that as head of state he could not participate in party politics.

In theory, the new constitution is a step forward for Kyrgyzstan, in that it gives political parties a real say in forming a government. Any party that wins over half of the 90 seats can pick a prime minister, who then selects the cabinet members. If no individual party gets a majority, the president can nominate any of them to pick a government.

Bakiev's intention is clearly that Ak Jol will swallow up many of the political parties that favour him, and rapidly grow into a force capable of winning an outright majority in the election.

If Ak Jol takes off, analysts warn that it will give Bakiev the power to get bills through parliament unopposed, and could place Kyrgyzstan on the slippery slope to the kind of authoritarian systems that characterise the rest of the Central Asia countries, where one man is in absolute control, backed by a compliant legislature.

That would spell an end to Kyrgyzstan's reputation as the most democratic, if sometimes chaotic Central Asian state, where no one party dominates, a diversity of political viewpoints can be expressed, and civil society is fairly strong.

Some analysts warn that the country is now going the same way as Russia and Kazakhstan, each of which has a range of political parties but is dominated by a pro-presidential force. Kazak president Nursultan Nazarbaev's Nur-Otan holds every seat in parliament, and there are worse cases like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan where no opposition is countenanced.

"This constitution is a facade. Having a party-based parliament in a presidential republic is a road leading straight to authoritarianism," said Daniyar Tokobaev, a political scientist who teaches at the department for social and humanitarian sciences at the International University of Kyrgyzstan.

"Kyrgyzstan is following in the footsteps of Russia and Kazakhstan. In Russia, the authorities created the clone parties United Russia and Fair Russia, which are vehicles for the president's policies."

Tokobaev argues that President Bakiev has adopted this new line because he is politically in a weak position. Following the March 2005 revolt which ousted his predecessor Askar Akaev, Bakiev won an election in July that year thanks to a tactical alliance with Felix Kulov, whom he made his prime minister when he himself became president.

Kulov enjoyed significant support in northern Kyrgyzstan, while Bakiev's support-base is in the south, and the two men agreed to an arrangement which became known as the "tandem", to avoid splitting the vote along regional lines.

"In reality, this is an effort to legitimise Bakiev's authority because during the presidential election, people were not voting for him [alone] but for the tandem," said Tokobaev.

In early 2007, Kulov left government and joined the opposition, where he quickly became a leading figure and highly critical of his former ally.

Not everyone agrees the Kazak and Russian comparisons are applicable.

"It's wrong to draw parallels - we are not Kazakhstan and we are not Russia," said Kubatbek Baybolov, co-chairman of the opposition Ak Shumkar party. "Those countries have unlimited financial, material and technological resources, and the authoritarian model of constructing a hierarchy of power is possible there. Kyrgyzstan doesn't have those kinds of resources and it's impossible to construct the same kind of rigid hierarchy founded on an authoritarian regime."

Ishenbay Abdurazakov, who formerly held the senior post of State Secretary, is concerned that too much power will be concentrated in the hands of one man.

"It's quite obvious that this constitution concentrates even more power in the hands of president. History tells us that if one person with unlimited power approaches matters in a rational manner, it will promote social development," he said. "But there is virtually no guarantee that the president will tackle pressing issues the right way."

"I personally have ceased to believe in the idea of an enlightened ruler. A democratic system would suit our requirements better."

Abdurazakov says there is no guarantee that Ak Jol would win in a fair election.

“If the election is fair and honest, and the opposition succeeds in consolidating its forces and setting out a coordinated programme of how it would address current problems, the authorities might lose,” he said. “But that will depend on what tactics the opposition adopt, and on their ability to run an election campaign.”

And there is no guarantee that the playing-field will be level. The last parliamentary election, held in early 2005, saw so many complaints of vote-rigging that it sparked widespread protests which in turn led to ex-president Akaev’s downfall.

According to the OSCE, the recent constitutional referendum was marred by many violations ranging from stuffing ballot-boxes to transporting voters to the polling stations.

Abdurazakov fears the new electoral system will simply see one set of corrupt practices replaced by another.

“At least the constitution solves one inflammatory problem, that of [first-past-the-post] single-mandate elections, where there was bribery of voters, rivalry between clans, and the ensuing political instability. But there’s no guarantee that bribery won’t shift to the parties, and people will buy places on the party lists,” he said.

Political scientist Karybek Baibosunov takes a different view – he welcomes a strong presidency precisely because the outgoing parliament had such a turbulent relationship with the executive.

“The new constitution makes Kyrgyzstan a presidential republic. That’s a good thing because now we can move in the same direction, and unite around a common idea,” he said in a recent television interview.

“Prior to this, we had anarchy, not democracy. Parliament wouldn’t allow government to work, and its sessions were reminiscent of gangland battles... The majoritarian system encouraged our feudal tendencies.

With only two months to go, the various pro-presidential parties have been joining Bakiev’s super-party or in some cases deciding to stay separate in hope of winning ground independently. The opposition, too, has got the message and is trying to form bigger alliances ahead of the polls.

The shift of focus from individual candidates to proportional representation presents parties with a new challenge - hitting the five per cent threshold needed if they are to be allocated a share of the seats in parliament. In addition to that nationwide percentage, they also need to win at least 0.5 per cent of the vote in each of Kyrgyzstan’s administrative regions, in a clear effort to filter out groups whose interests are local, even clan-based.

“Only a few political parties will overcome this barrier,” warned Omurbek Tekebaev, a former speaker of

parliament who now heads the opposition Ata-Meken Socialist Party. “Of course they will be parties with access to the administrative and financial resources of the regime, even if they have to break the law to get over the threshold.”

Tekebaev believes a lower threshold would have allowed a wider range of views to be represented in parliament.

The requirement has provoked particular anger among politicians from the substantial ethnic Uzbek minority, which is heavily concentrated in the south of Kyrgyzstan.

Davron Sobirov, a former member of parliament who heads the Uzbek community body for Osh region, sees the mandatory threshold as discriminatory. He describes it as “the most mistaken and anti-constitutional measure in Kyrgyzstan’s recent history”.

Sobirov said the Vatan party, which largely draws its support from Uzbeks in the south, has little chance of surmounting either the national threshold or – in the north of Kyrgyzstan – the lower regional hurdle.

“I therefore regard this parliamentary quota system as a deliberate move to create obstacles in the way of our party, and of ethnic minorities as a whole,” he said.

However, some commentators argue that five per cent is just about the right compromise between imposing an over-exacting requirement and allowing a free-for-all which would lead to a fragmented parliament.

Ak Jol’s deputy chairperson, Elmira Ibraimova, has no problem with the barrier, saying an election race that included all the country’s many political parties would leave no conclusive winner.

Sania Sagnaeva, a senior political analyst with the International Crisis Group, points out that other countries apply higher thresholds. In her view, the real problem is that the parties have little time left to prepare for the election because of the short advance notice.

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