

KYRGYZSTAN'S POLITICAL TURMOIL

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Within a span of four months, the Kyrgyz Republic has witnessed power shifts, provisionally and definitively, among three presidents and five prime ministers. Most recently, Sadyr Japarov was sworn in as president on January 28, 2021, after winning the presidential elections held on January 10. Ulukbek Maripov, a former Chairman of the Accounts Chamber, was sworn in as the Prime Minister on February 3.

The January 10 presidential elections were the critical consequence of months of political upheaval that followed the contentious October 4, 2020 parliamentary elections. The opposition alleged widespread irregularities in the elections to the 120-member unicameral parliament (*Jogorku Kenesh*, or the Supreme Council). The parties aligned with the government of then President-elect, Sooronbay Jeenbekov, had emerged victorious in those elections.

The opposition incited protests, stormed government buildings, and demanded the conduct of new elections as well as the release of politicians controversially put in prison. A former elected member of the Supreme Council – Sadyr Japarov, serving an 11-year sentence for being involved in the kidnapping of a local official in 2013 during anti-corruption protests at the Kumtor gold mine – was among those freed from prison by his supporters.

Subsequently, the Central Commission for Elections and Referenda annulled the results of the parliamentary elections, and Prime Minister Kubatbek Boronov resigned on October 6, 2020. The very next day, Japarov was nominated as the interim prime minister by feuding opposition groups. A state of emergency was declared by President Jeenbekov, first on October 9 and then on October 12, of which only the latter got endorsed by the Parliament on October 13.

When Jeenbekov resigned on October 15, Japarov was declared as the acting President, after the Speaker of Parliament, Kanat Isayev, declined to hold the office. Japarov, therefore, went from being a parliamentarian to prisoner to assuming the roles of acting Prime Minister and acting President, within a short period of time.^{[1](#)}

The interim government decided to postpone parliamentary elections, earlier scheduled to be held in December 2020, till June 2021 and to instead hold early presidential elections in January 2021, along with a referendum on whether the country should have a presidential form of government.^{[2](#)} Japarov stepped down from his posts in November 2020 to become eligible to run for the office of President, since the Kyrgyz constitution bars interim leaders from contesting in elections.

The January 2021 elections saw seventeen claimants to power. Kyrgyz voters, of which just under forty per cent turned out, voted in favour of Japarov, while in the referendum, the majority voted for a return to a presidential form of government.^{[3](#)} In the Kyrgyz Republic, tenures of political leaders have been intricately linked with referendums for constitutional change. The January 2021 referendum vote for a presidential system is being viewed as having a better chance of ensuring accountability.^{[4](#)}

Analysts note that the strong 'anti-elite' and 'anti-establishment' feelings in the electorate helped Japarov in securing victory in the elections.^{[5](#)} He was viewed as a nationalist, receiving the

popular sympathies for being allegedly wronged by the establishment. Japarov also promised a strong government sans corruption.[6](#)

Kyrgyzstan is viewed as Russia's traditional sphere of influence and China's strategic backyard. Both Russia and China have been monitoring the period of political turmoil with cautious non-intervention. Japarov reiterated his country's strategic alliance with Russia and assured the continued status of Russian as the country's official language.[7](#) President Vladimir Putin, in his greetings to Japarov, pledged to cooperate to develop bilateral relations for mutual benefit.[8](#)

Kyrgyz-Russian relations, though, are not without challenges. Over half-a-million Kyrgyz workers in Russia face a host of issues, including charges of discrimination, in addition to the precariousness imposed on them by the COVID-19 crisis.[9](#) Japarov, at multiple instances, has promised to create economic opportunities domestically for migrant workers.

However, no concrete policies have been put forth. The economy has also been ravaged by the pandemic and systemic corruption. GDP growth forecast for 2021 has been reduced from 4.5 per cent to 4 per cent.[10](#) Kyrgyzstan scored 31 out of 100 in the Corruption Perceptions Index, lower than the 36 out of 100 average regional score of Eastern Europe and Central Asia.[11](#)

As for Kyrgyz-China relations, Japarov has difficult choices to make. In the violent uprisings that followed the October 2020 events, given long-standing apprehensions against the foreign-funded mining industry, Chinese-run mines were among the facilities occupied by protesters. A Chinese-owned oil refinery in Kara Balta, country's largest, was threatened.

Beijing conveyed its concerns about the safety of its interests and enterprises in Kyrgyzstan, in meetings that the Chinese Ambassador had with the Kyrgyz Foreign Minister on October 16. The Kyrgyz Ambassador to China was also summoned by the Chinese Foreign Security Commissioner on October 19.[12](#)

Nearly 40 per cent of the country's external debt, at \$1.8 billion, is owed to China.[13](#) While previous governments have secured temporary deferments, Japarov has also considered voluntary financial contributions from citizens to make the repayments.[14](#) The auctioning of government assets is also part of the menu of choices. Developing the Jetim-Too iron ore deposit to pay off Chinese debt has also been deliberated upon.[15](#)

Analysts note that a failure on the part of Japarov to deliver on his campaign promises concerning the economy could lead to inevitable discontentment. A draft constitution, endorsed by Japarov in November-December 2020, seeks to undo the 2010 Constitutional referendum, and introduce a new consultative council, People's *Kurultai*. This proposal, on which a referendum will be held later in the year, has drawn widespread criticism from the opposition, legal experts, journalists, and human rights activists. Political-economic compulsions created by external actors, in addition to the intensifying economic expectations, could lead to another political crisis. While popular support for Japarov could perhaps help tide over minor non-accomplishments, failure to deliver on the plethora of promises on ensuring economic prosperity could make his position untenable as well.

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