

“With the presidential election in less than a year, the president and his party need to make remarkable efforts in a short period of time, given the low rating of the Social Democratic Party in the last election, in order to regain the population’s trust” - expert Zarema Askarova, writing specially for cabar.asia, analyzes the political situation in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan closed 2016 with a constitutional referendum and countrywide elections for local administrations. The past electoral campaign was characterized as politically correct, i.e. the party did not conduct a “kompromat war” and make such material a central plank of their platform. Instead, they aimed to attract voters by giving high-profile promises, such as free travel on public transport, renovation of public roofs and elevators, construction of parking lots, 50,000 som in financial assistance to mothers, and others.

If we talk about the referendum then the events were characterized by dynamism and even confrontation. The main complaint about the referendum dealt with procedural violations, as well as disagreement over certain articles of the proposed changes. The controversy surrounding the referendum resulted in a confrontation between parliamentary factions, the collapse of the ruling coalition, and the removal of the leader of the Kyrgyzstan political party. On January 1, 2017, Cholpon Dzhakupova turned in her deputy mandate while harshly criticizing the referendum. The president and the Social Democratic Party (SDPK), by using “divide and rule” tactics, decided the situation was in their favor having thus disorganized the ruling coalition and then proceeded to create a new coalition with the Kyrgyzstan and Bir Bol parties. Despite the fact that the Respublica-Ata Jurt party was not included in the majority coalition, it expressed its solidarity with the president of the need to hold a referendum.

With Omurbek Tekebayev opposing the referendum, his Ata Meken party failed to fully take part in the elections for local deputies as they only managed to gain seats in seven cities. Ata Meken did not even participate in elections for Bishkek city council. The debate over the referendum also fueled predictions by some experts about the probability of parliament’s dissolution following amendments to the constitution. Their opinion was based on the fact that changes in governmental and, particularly, parliamentary powers would mean fresh parliamentary elections, as the current deputies cannot be legitimate since they were elected under the old constitution. However, looking at the results of parliamentary elections in 2015 and city council elections in 2016, SDPK’s popularity is quite low. In this vein, it can be concluded that holding early elections for the Jogorku Kenesh (JK) is risky for the president, and it is likely that the current parliamentarians will complete their terms of office.

Voter turnout indicates distrust with the authorities

Voter turnout was at a low level. Just over 40% of registered voters came to the polls.^[1] One reason for the low turnout, when compared with previous elections, is the introduction of biometric voter registration, which sharply reduced the possibility of carousel voting and ballot box stuffing. Another compelling reason for the low turnout is distrust of the authorities, as the people are not interested in issues of separation of powers between the branches of government. Most of the population simply survives and are concerned about more important issues for them such as economic well-being and the country's development. They do not care about carving up resources and the powers of the prime minister and president.

In other Central Asian countries, the turnout, by contrast, is relatively high.

Table 1: Voter turnout for the elections in the Central Asian countries

No.	Country	Election	Turnout %
1	Uzbekistan	2016 presidential election	88
2	Kazakhstan	2016 parliamentary election	77.1
3	Turkmenistan	2015 district council elections	92.12
4	Kyrgyzstan	2016 city council elections	40

However, many experts note that the figures shown in the official sources do not reflect reality and are quite exaggerated. Polls carried out by independent organizations show that the real turnouts are much smaller.

In this case, the referendum was held the same day local council elections so it is possible to ensure voter turnout for the proposed amendments. According to the Central Election Commission (CEC), the lowest turnout for the referendum was observed in Osh (28.44%).^[2] Obviously, this was due to the fact that no city council elections were held in Osh, while in Bishkek and other regions of the country, with the exception of Chui region, turnout exceeded 40%.^[3] This situation in Osh region has probably developed as a result of artificial intervention in the electoral process.

Table 2: Voter turnout for the referendum ^[4]

	Registered Voters	Votes	%
Kyrgyzstan	2,851,952	1,199,941	42.07%
Bishkek	343,034	148,887	43.40%
Osh	132,691	37,731	28.44%
Jalal-Abad Oblast	526,418	241,832	45.94%
Issyk-Kul Oblast	254,353	101,996	40.1%
Naryn Oblast	170,265	78,553	46.14%
Osh Oblast	578,632	248,827	43%
Talas Oblast	130,025	62,985	48.44%
Chui Oblast	464,544	178,002	38.32%
Batken Oblast	237,990	100,231	42.12%

Local parties as the new players

The city council elections were notable for the fact that substantial progress was made by parties with short-lived political histories such as Tabyлга (Cholpon-Ata), The Party of Power (Karakol), Jany-door (Batken), and Elaman (Kara-Balta).

The success of local parties is that the active part of the community decided not to unite with the parties in power but to create their own local party lists of candidates including prominent representatives of their community, which allowed them to win. Positive results were achieved thanks to the fact that these cities are few and their population is more mobile. In Bishkek, such initiatives were not successful. A striking example is the Democrat party. Members ran for city council seats but they were unable to win the support of voters in Bishkek since the capital is home to a numerous and motley population. One of the possible reasons for the party's failure in Bishkek was also due to their position on the referendum. They clearly were against the referendum and outlined their opposition as one of the planks of their platform.

Findings

Elections results for local councils have shown that people do not trust the president and his party. With SDPK polling so low, the Social Democrats failed to win an absolute majority in any city and in some cities they didn't even manage a majority of votes. A striking example of SDPK's deteriorating popularity is evident in elections for Bishkek's city council. SDPK currently holds 21 seats but will only maintain 13, which is almost half of their current number. This is in contrast to Respublica-Ata-Jurt, which preserved its 11 seats and even added one more.

The controversy surrounding the referendum proved once again the shortcomings of political party building in Kyrgyzstan. In Kyrgyzstan, the parties are not representative of party ideology but rather symbolize the interests of one man whether that be its leader or the person financing the party.

Political parties in Kyrgyzstan do not possess well-built internal power verticals. All the activities of the party are concentrated in Bishkek and there is no communication with the regions. The parties do not carry out work with the population, do not recruit new members, and do not promote their platforms. Instead, canvassing begins on the eve of elections. At this time, the party begins to feverishly recruit competent people who have financial pull with the regions. For this reason, we often see a migration of party members from one to another. These candidates often begin to dictate their terms, which leads to conflict with the party leaders and has a negative effect on the party's image. A lack of vetting and staff management leads to the fact that oftentimes candidates have a criminal history. A significant determinant in approving party lists is not dependent on the beliefs and achievements of the candidate but on financial contributions to the party.

In countries with developed democracies, where party building is based on the party's ideology, membership in political parties is much more stable than in emerging democracies. The voters, as well as the party's leadership, do not welcome the transition from one party to another, while in Kyrgyzstan membership in the party is only limited "from election to election."

Conclusion

Starting with the first year in office, the president pursued a policy of strengthening his power by appointing his agents to all key government positions. The reshuffle in the spring of 2016 finally strengthened his position as the prime minister and parliament speaker were both from SDPK and key positions in the police were also given to people entrusted by the president. However, the policy pursued by the president to strengthen his power vertical caused problems for some people, the general public, and a number of political players.

With the presidential election in less than a year, the president and his party need to make remarkable efforts in a short period of time, given the low rating of the Social Democratic Party in the last election, in order to regain the population's trust while being able to leave the presidency for the Social Democrats or a person who will meet the interests of the party. Even the presence of leverage in the form of colossal administrative resources and "arm-twisting" opponents cannot guarantee great success in the elections.

2017 will see Kyrgyzstan elect a new president. Already, work has begun on the part of some politicians in preparation for the elections. According to some experts, the constitutional amendments were proposed by the president seeing that he will qualify for the prime minister's post upon leaving office. However, President Atambaev continues to deny he is seeking this office.

References

[1] Central Election Commission. “Информация по явке избирателей на выборах депутатов местных кенешей и референдуме Кыргызской Республики, 11 декабря 2016 года на 20.00 часов” [Information on voter turnout for local council elections and the referendum as of 20:00, December 11, 2016]. December 11, 2016. Accessed February 3, 2017.

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[2] Ibid.

[3] ———. “Перечень кенешей” [List of city councils]. December 2016. Accessed February 3, 2017.

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[4] Ibid.

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