

# Election Watch for the Digital Age



## Kyrgyzstan

### Preelection assessment

*Parliamentary elections set for fall 2021*

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Kyrgyzstan's upcoming elections are the first national contest since a protracted political crisis, as well as constitutional amendments that effectively changed the country from a parliamentary to presidential system. Two days after the October 2020 parliamentary elections, the Central Election Commission unilaterally annulled the election amid allegations of vote buying, intimidation, and misuse of administrative resources. Opposition parties had failed to pass the threshold necessary to gain seats in the October election; the parties that performed well were linked to then-president Sooronbay Jeenbekov and Raimbek Matraimov, a former government official and subject of recent, largescale money-laundering case. Mass protests opposing the results continued after the annulment, prompting the resignation of Jeenbekov and the dissolution of the government. The parliament subsequently postponed new elections, instead extending its own mandate in a process that lacked a clear legal basis. Sadyr Japarov, a formerly imprisoned nationalist-populist politician with links to organized crime, briefly assumed the position of prime minister and acting president before being winning the January 2021 presidential election. Japarov's controversial ascent to the newly empowered presidency may signal a return to strongman rule and a diminished role for the parliament.

The upcoming vote takes place in a climate of heightened volatility and restrictions on civic space. Over 600 people were injured in post-election clashes between the police, Japarov supporters, and the opposition, leading to the brief imposition of martial law in Bishkek. Journalists who covered the elections and ensuing protests were also intimidated, detained, and attacked for their work. Last year, the government proposed problematic reporting requirements for nongovernmental organizations and a law "On Information Manipulation," which would allow the government to block websites and shut down social media networks for disseminating "false or unbelievable information." Though neither measure was enacted, they set the stage for future efforts to curb expression and civic engagement in the country.

Freedom House has identified the following as key digital interference issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Information manipulation:** The persistent manipulation of online news and social media compromises the information space, a key component of a resilient electoral environment. Owners of news sites, some of which are owned by politicians or powerful business interests, sometimes exert editorial pressure to push their own political interests. Individuals are often secretly paid to influence online discussions about politicians and political issues. Networks of fake accounts supporting Jeenbekov, former president Almazbek Atambayev, Matraimov, and Japarov been identified in recent years. After the corruption scandal that embroiled Matraimov, analysts found that approximately 80 percent of social media profiles publicly supporting him were fake. Pro-Japarov commentators were identified during his bid for power in October 2020 and hundreds of fake accounts supporting Jeenbekov were removed from Facebook in December 2020.

- **Arrests for online activity:** Numerous vague laws facilitate the arrest of social media users and online journalists. In 2019, Aftandil Zhorobekov, the administrator of a Facebook group devoted to discussions of arbitrary governance in Kyrgyzstan, was arrested on apparently politically motivated charges related to calling for mass protests and inciting national hatred. The proposed “On Information Manipulation” further demonstrates the political appetite for quelling protected speech online.
- **Harassment and violence:** While average users are not subject to a significant level of harassment or violence for their online activities, some isolated incidents occur, often involving contributors to online media outlets. The violence directed at journalists during the October protests underscores this risk. Investigations into powerful politicians and coverage of protests or election-related controversies ahead of the election could prompt similar offline violence and harassment.
- **Cyberattacks:** Politically motivated cyberattacks are a significant problem, and put the safety and work of journalists, critics, and activists at risk. In March 2020, a Telegram group planning a demonstration was compromised and deleted. The previous year, most independent news and fact-checking sites were disabled by DDoS attacks following the publication of the Matraimov investigation. Critical activists and journalists also report attempts to break into their social media accounts.
- **Internet shutdowns:** Kyrgyzstani authorities occasionally disrupt internet connectivity during politically sensitive moments. Notably, mobile and broadband internet were throttled as protests broke out following the October election. Connectivity was disrupted locally the previous year when clashes broke out surrounding the arrest of Atambayev. Similar restrictions during election-related demonstrations could restrict access to information and provide the government with cover if it instituted a violent crackdown on protesters.

Kyrgyzstan has a score of 44 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House’s Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The score reflects problematic elections, significant levels of corruption, and weak rule of law, including a politicized judiciary. The country is rated **Partly Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020*, with a score of 39 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties; **Partly Free** in *Freedom on the Net 2020*, with an internet freedom score of 56 out of 100; and as a **consolidated authoritarian regime** in *Nations in Transit 2021*, with a score of 14 out of 100 for the country’s democratic progress. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Kyrgyzstan country reports in [Freedom in the World](#), [Freedom on the Net](#), and [Nations in Transit](#).