

Tough Coalition Talks Seen After Kyrgyz Vote

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A Kyrgyz girl walking past a newsstand in Bishkek on Monday. International observers praised the vote as vibrant. **Shamil Zhumatov**

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan — Five parties won seats in Kyrgyzstan's new parliament on Monday, a fragmented result that means tough negotiations lie ahead to form a coalition to lead the country out of failed authoritarian rule.

Kyrgyzstan is trying to form the first parliamentary democracy in a region dominated by post-Soviet strongmen, only four months after hundreds died in ethnic violence and six months after its president was toppled in a popular uprising.

Sunday's elections were praised by international observers and passed without violence and only minor reports of fraud. Under new rules, the parliament will be the country's main decision-making body, assuming more power than the president.

More than half of the electorate voted, but no party secured more than 9 percent of the vote.

Ata Zhurt, a party whose members include former colleagues of ousted President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, narrowly placed first with 8.7 percent of the vote, the Central Elections Commission said with almost all votes counted.

The other four parties that won seats include one whose leader was an architect of the reforms that shifted power to the parliament, and two that staunchly oppose the changes.

"We can be proud of the fact that these elections were completely different to those we have seen before," President Roza Otunbayeva said in a televised address.

Otunbayeva says she will remain as president until Dec. 31, 2011.

After nearly two decades of authoritarian rule since the collapse of the Soviet Union, interim leaders want to empower a prime minister to bridge political and ethnic rifts.

"This is the first time that the Kyrgyz people have tasted democracy," said Chynybai Tursunbekov, candidate for the Social-Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan, second in the polls.

Otunbayeva came to power after a popular revolt in April toppled Bakiyev, a former opposition leader who had taken over after his Soviet-era predecessor was chased from office by street protesters in 2005. Bakiyev is now exiled in Belarus.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which sent about 250 observers, said the wide choice of candidates and a vibrant campaign set the vote apart from other elections in the region.

"I have observed many elections in Central Asia over the years, but this is the first election where I could not predict the outcome," said Morten Hoeglund, special coordinator of the short-term OSCE observer mission to Kyrgyzstan.

The Central Elections Commission said five of the 29 parties that participated in the elections won more than 5 percent of the nationwide vote and more than 0.5 percent in each of the country's regions, the minimum requirement to enter the parliament.

"The election passed quietly. For that we can be thankful," said Uulkan Turusbekova, a 40-year-old accountant in Bishkek.

Turnout was 57 percent, and the highest percentage of voters — 66 percent — was in Osh, the epicenter of the country's worst ethnic violence in June. The proliferation of parties meant nearly two-thirds of votes went to groups that won no seats.

The 120 seats will be distributed proportionately to those parties that pass the entry threshold.

"The battle now will be inside parliament, and not on the streets," said Mars Sariyev, an independent analyst in Bishkek.

The United States, which operates a military air base in the country to support the war in Afghanistan, has vocally supported the plan to create the region's first parliamentary democracy.

Russia, which also has an air base in Kyrgyzstan, opposes the parliamentary model, arguing that it could expose the country to more violence or a power grab by Islamist militants.

Ata Zhurt, which placed first, is popular among ethnic Kyrgyz in the south, where clashes with ethnic Uzbeks led to the June violence.

"They will take care of the future of the Kyrgyz and will work conscientiously for the good of the nation," said Burma Isakova, a local journalist in Osh.

Not everyone agreed. Tursun, a 55-year-old garage manager in Bishkek, said he was afraid the new government would attempt to resurrect Bakiyev's policies.

"These are Bakiyev's people," he said, declining to give his last name. "They will sell our land to the Chinese, the Kazakhs and the Uzbeks. In 50 years, what will be left?"

The Social-Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan was a close second with 8.2 percent. Its leader, Almazbek Atambayev, was deputy to Otunbayeva in the interim government that took power in April.

The Ar-Namys party of former Prime Minister Felix Kulov, which has been a fierce critic of the parliamentary model of government and has campaigned on a platform of close relations with Russia, was third in the vote with a 7.6 percent share.

Respublika, led by an entrepreneur, was in fourth place, and Ata Meken, led by Omurbek Tekebayev, author of the reforms that made the vote possible, placed fifth.

Critics of the vote say the threat of violence persists, particularly if parties believe that they have been excluded from the new parliament or should criminal groups want to foment unrest.

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