

Kyrgyzstan's Prime Minister Claims Election Victory

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Atambayev in Bishkek on Monday. **Vladimir Pirogov**

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan — Kyrgyzstan's Moscow-backed prime minister claimed victory on Monday in a presidential election tainted by charges of voting abuses and protests by defeated challengers from the restive south of the former Soviet republic. ☒

With more than 99 percent of ballots counted, pro-business Prime Minister Almazbek Atambayev had 63 percent of the vote, an outright majority that avoids the need for a second-round run-off against a potentially strong rival from the south. ☒

Atambayev's win reinforces reforms designed to make Kyrgyzstan Central Asia's first parliamentary democracy after 20 years of authoritarian rule that triggered a bloody revolution in April last year. ☒

But international observers reported cases of ballot box stuffing and vote buying, while a group of candidates vowed to challenge the result even before polls had closed on Sunday. ☒

Atambayev's two main challengers from a field of 16 each polled just below 15 percent. Both enjoy support from Kyrgyz nationalists in the poorer south of the country that has grown since ethnic riots killed hundreds in June 2010. ☒

About 200 supporters of third-placed Kamchibek Tashiyev, a trained boxer popular in the south, rallied for several hours in Jalalabad and blocked a major road. Dozens more gathered in Osh, the largest city in the south, before dispersing.

☒Tashiyev and Adakhan Madumarov, a three-time national billiards champion who was second, refuse to rule out protests. ☒

Tashiyev, a former emergency situations minister, demanded a new election. "I won't calm down," he told reporters in the capital, Bishkek. "Voters are in place, and you will hear their reaction soon."

☒Atambayev, born in the Russian-leaning north of Kyrgyzstan, is the flag-bearer of reforms set in motion by outgoing leader Roza Otunbayeva, the former ambassador to London and Washington who became caretaker president after the revolution. ☒

The reforms have watered down the powers of the president and established the parliament as the main decision-making body, changes opposed by the prime minister's main challengers. ☒

In comments sure to please Moscow, Atambayev told reporters that he did not support the presence of the base at the Manas airport near Bishkek, which is used by the U.S. military to support the war in Afghanistan. The lease expires in 2014. ☒

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's election observer mission said it was "cautiously optimistic" about the future of democracy in Kyrgyzstan, but noted flaws with the compilation of voter lists and tabulation. ☒

"It's disappointing that the problems on election day did not live up to the democratic promise," Corien Jonker, head of the mission of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, told a news conference. ☒

"Our observers reported a number of cases of ballot-box stuffing, multiple and family voting, vote buying and the transport of voters from polling station to polling station with the intention of multiple voting," she said. ☒

The OSCE also noted positive aspects to the election: its pluralism, competitiveness and respect for fundamental freedom.

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