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New Kyrgyz Prime Minister Elected

By The Moscow Times

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BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan — Kyrgyzstan's divided parliament elected a neutral candidate as prime minister on Wednesday in an attempt to avert political turmoil and revive the country's shrinking economy.

Zhantoro Satybaldiyev, the 56-year-old head of the presidential administration, warned deputies in the five-party parliament that his new Cabinet would take "unpopular measures" to fight corruption and restore growth.

"I have never promised to replenish the budget," he said before securing 111 of 113 votes cast in a late-night vote in parliament. "We will have to cut budget spending, and we will also have to improve tax administration."

Kyrgyzstan has seen two presidents deposed by violent revolts since 2005 and was rocked by ethnic riots in June 2010, when around 500 people were killed. A new model of parliamentary democracy, backed by the United States but viewed with suspicion by Russia, makes parliament the main decision-making body and gives the prime minister more powers

than the president.

"In the name of Kyrgyzstan and development, I call on everyone to work in peace and harmony," said Satybaldiyev, who headed the state body set up to rebuild Osh and Jalalabad, the southern cities worst hit by the 2010 unrest.

Three of the five parties in parliament agreed this week to form a coalition government, two weeks after the previous administration collapsed under the strain of graft accusations against then-Prime Minister Omurbek Babanov.

"Until stability is established, we will not be able to attract large-scale foreign investment," said Satybaldiyev, whose previous jobs include transportation minister and governor of the Osh region. "We need to lead a fight against corruption."

Babanov resigned last weekend after his Respublika party was frozen out of the three-party ruling coalition spearheaded by the Social-Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan.

His election as prime minister last December had been a glimpse of hope for many in the impoverished country, signalling the conclusion of an 18-month drive to build the first parliamentary democracy in otherwise authoritarian Central Asia.

But the Kyrgyz economy, which depends heavily on production from Canadian miner Centerra Gold's Kumtor mine, was dealt a heavy blow this year as output dropped, contributing to a 5 percentage-point contraction in January-July GDP.

Remittances from migrant Kyrgyz workers also help keep the economy afloat. Per capita GDP is less than a tenth of that in oil-rich neighbor Kazakhstan.

Withdrawing from the previous coalition on Aug. 22, deputies from the Ata-Meken party — which also sits in the new coalition — warned that Kyrgyzstan risked defaulting on its $2.8 billion foreign debt.

The only party outside the previous coalition, Ata Zhurt, enjoys strong support among Kyrgyz nationalists, particularly in the poorer south. It won marginally more seats than any other single party in the last parliamentary election in October 2010.

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