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Kyrgyzstan Set to Cling to Russia in Face of Security Threats

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Election campaign posters are attached to trucks on the outskirts of the capital Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, Oct. 1.

Pro-Russian parties look set to retain their dominance when Kyrgyzstan elects a new parliament on Sunday, but the apparent stability masks ethnic tensions and rising Islamist radicalism in the former Soviet republic.

The mostly Muslim country of 6 million people has swung closer to Moscow and further away from the West: Under a deadline set by its parliament, the United States last year shut down an airbase in Kyrgyzstan that had served U.S. operations in Afghanistan since 2001.

Russia retains a military airbase in the Central Asian state, fearing an advance of militant Islam in the region. Also closely watching is China, whose restive Xinjiang region borders Kyrgyzstan and which is present in several Kyrgyz industries, including energy and mining.

More than 2,000 candidates representing 14 parties are running for the 120 seats in parliament, which enjoys stronger control of the government and economy than

Kyrgyzstan's more autocratic Central Asian neighbors.

The likely winners are the Social Democrats, who led the outgoing coalition and are still close to President Almazbek Atambayev, even though he formally stepped down as their leader after being elected in 2011.

"The pro-presidential Social Democrats are all but certain to emerge winners," said Kazakhstan-based Central Asia analyst Alexander Knyazev.

Islamist Threat

But some opposition parties popular in the poorer south, where radical Islam is on the rise, may exploit the country's poverty to organize protests, especially if they lose the election, he said.

Hundreds of Kyrgyz citizens are fighting for Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq. Security forces killed six gunmen in two firefights in the capital Bishkek in July, saying they were IS members planning bomb attacks.

The country is still healing the wounds of clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the southern cities of Osh and Jalalabad which killed more than 400 people in 2010.

"The Kyrgyz nationalist narrative that emerged after the Osh pogroms is now firmly entrenched and facilitated by a variety of groups across the country," the International Crisis Group think tank said in a report published on Wednesday.

Nationalism is aggravated by the existence of powerful regional clans. "Pockets of religious radicalization and intolerance, sometimes presented as traditional Kyrgyz values, are also a challenge," ICG wrote. "Instead of confronting these trends, political parties are incorporating them."

Copying Moscow

Faced with these challenges, Atambayev, two of whose predecessors as president were overthrown in revolts in 2005 and 2010, has snuggled closer to Russia.

Reliance on the former imperial master is heavy: Moscow has written off the bulk of Kyrgyz debts, Russian energy giant Gazprom owns Kyrgyz gas pipelines, and up to a million Kyrgyz migrants work in Russia.

Copying Russia, the outgoing parliament approved the first reading of a bill banning "gay propaganda" and another requiring foreign-funded charities to be registered as "foreign agents" if they encroach into politics. The two draft laws were put on hold after criticism from the West and human rights bodies.

Kyrgyzstan has also joined the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and belongs to the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization of six ex-Soviet states, seen by some analysts as a regional counterbalance to NATO.

Ties with the United States worsened in July after Washington conferred a human rights prize

on an ethnic Uzbek dissident who is serving a life sentence on charges of inciting ethnic hatred during the Osh riots.

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