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Kyrgyzstan Set for Closer Ties With Russia After Polls

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BISHKEK — Kyrgyzstan's Moscow-leaning parties appeared certain on Sunday of being able to form a new coalition to draw the hard-up nation further into Moscow's orbit after an election overshadowed by ethnic tensions and the threat of Islamist violence.

With more than 99 percent of votes counted, the pro-Russian Social Democratic Party led with 27 percent of votes, with the opposition Respublika-Ata Zhurt second on 20 percent, election authorities said.

Six political parties, mainly supporting President Almazbek Atambayev's policy of building closer ties with Russia, had passed the threshold to take seats in the 120-member legislature, early official data showed.

The mainly Muslim country of 6 million has moved closer to Russia and away from the West in recent years. The United States last year shut an air base in Kyrgyzstan that served U.S. operations in Afghanistan since 2001.

Kyrgyzstan, on a drug trafficking route from Afghanistan, remains vulnerable to political

volatility after ousting two presidents in popular uprisings in 2005 and 2010.

The Social Democrats, who led the coalition in the previous legislature, are still closely linked to Atambayev, even though he stepped down as leader after being elected president in 2011.

Coalition-building needed to forge a majority with the right to select a prime minister looked set to be smooth. The three parties seen as most likely allies of the Social Democrats — Kyrgyzstan, Onuguu-Progress and Bir Bol — gained a total of around 30 percent of votes.

The Ata Meken Party, which at times has been a vocal critic of the government but was a partner in the last ruling coalition, finished sixth with about 8 percent of the vote.

Russia, China

Atambayev has forged warm ties with President Vladimir Putin of Russia, which retains a military air base in Kyrgyzstan, fearing an advance of militant Islam in the region.

Moscow has forgiven a lot of Kyrgyz debt and developed large economic projects in the landlocked Central Asian state. Around 1 million Kyrgyz work in Russia, sending home remittances from the country.

Closely watching Sunday's election was China, whose restive Xinjiang region borders Kyrgyzstan and which is present in several Kyrgyz industries, including energy and mining.

Kyrgyzstan is a member of the Moscow-led military bloc, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (ODKB), and of the Eurasian Economic Union, a pet project of Putin.

The outgoing parliament voted unanimously in 2011 to name a peak in the Tien Shan mountains after Putin.

By contrast, ties with the United States soured in July when Washington conferred a human rights prize on an ethnic Uzbek dissident serving a life sentence on charges of inciting ethnic hatred during clashes between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz that killed more than 400 people in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010.

A group of Western monitors is expected to publish its assessment report at 11:00 a.m. Moscow time on Monday.

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