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Russian Ally Kyrgyzstan's Wanted Ex-Leader Evades Arrest After Dramatic Raid

By Reuters

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Vladimir Voronin / TASS

Kyrgyz elite security forces attempted to arrest former president Almazbek Atambayev at his house on Wednesday, but his supporters kept them at bay and killed at least one operative, local media and authorities reported.

Parliament accused Atambayev of corruption and stripped him of immunity from prosecution in June after he fell out with current president Sooronbai Jeenbekov in the former Soviet republic that is closely allied with Moscow.

The Kyrgyz State Committee on National Security confirmed its special forces unit was seeking to detain Atambayev at the village outside the capital Bishkek and had used rubber bullets.

An Atambayev-controlled television station, April, broadcast footage in which gunshots could be heard and armed men seen around the building wearing camouflage and bulletproof vests.

News websites 24.kg and Akipress.kg said operatives entered the house in Koi Tash village while a helicopter flew overhead.

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They cited witnesses saying wounded people left the house.

But April's correspondent at the site said Atambayev's supporters overpowered security forces, while independent news website kloop.kg showed footage of them celebrating as they led disarmed men out of the property.

Kyrgyzstan's Health Ministry said one security force member died in hospital from a gunshot wound to the chest.

About two dozen people were wounded, it added.

Later, several news websites posted footage of clashes between police and Atambayev supporters blocking the road towards his house in order to prevent a potential second raid.

Since Atambayev lost his immunity, police have repeatedly asked him to come in for questioning, which he has refused to do, dismissing the requests as illegal.

Atambayev met Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow in late July, but in a statement afterwards the Russian president expressed support for Jeenbekov.

Jeenbekov's office said late on Wednesday he was urgently returning to Bishkek, having cut short a vacation. He called a security council meeting for Thursday morning.

Neither Atambayev nor the government gave an official version of the day's events.

Jeenbekov, who came to power in 2017 with Atambayev's support and used to be his close ally, sidelined his predecessor last year by reshuffling senior security officials and wresting control over the ruling party out of Atambayev's hands.

Russia has a military air base in Kyrgyzstan and counts it among its closest political allies.

Atambayev, 62, has taken part in two violent revolts which overthrew his predecessors in 2005 and 2010 in the politically volatile Central Asian nation.

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