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Kyrgyz Protesters Take Government House, Free Ex-Leader After Post-Vote Clashes

By Tolkun Namatbayeva for AFP

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People protesting the results of a parliamentary vote gather by a bonfire in front of the seized main government building, known as the White House, in Bishkek, on Oct. 6. **Vyacheslav Oseledko / AFP**

Protesters seized Kyrgyzstan's seat of government and freed a jailed former president on Tuesday after demonstrations against an election marred by vote-buying accusations spiralled into violent clashes with police.

Opposition supporters hit the streets of the capital Bishkek the previous evening to demand the resignation of pro-Russian President Sooronbay Jeenbekov and a re-run of Sunday's poll.

Police used water cannon, stun grenades and tear gas to disperse protesters attempting to force their way through the gates of the building that houses the former Soviet republic's parliament and presidential offices.

Photos published by Radio Free Europe later showed protesters strolling around the building unhindered.

Embed:

> Protesters are inside President Jeenbekov's office.
>
> Photo credit: @Azattyk_Radiosu reporters @BakytTorogeldi, Aybek Biybosunov pic.twitter.com/wegc65BmZS
>
> — Bermet Talant (@ser_ou_parecer) October 5, 2020

A crowd of around 2,000 people then forced their way into the nearby National Security Committee building, where former president Almazbek Atambayev was jailed.

Adil Turdukuov, an activist and ally of Atambayev who witnessed the release said the ex-leader was freed "without force or use of any weapons" and that national security officials had not attempted to halt protesters.

"They surrendered," he added.

Footage posted on social media showed Atambayev, 64, greeting supporters after he left jail, where he was serving an 11-year-sentence for his role in the illegal release of a mob boss.

Atambayev was once close with his successor Jeenbekov, but the pair fell out shortly after the 61-year-old won the country's last presidential election in 2017.

Both men are viewed as loyal allies of Russia, whose strategic position in the country is likely to remain unaffected despite the unrest.

Russian leader Vladimir Putin tried to broker a peace between the pair last year but could not prevent Atambayev's arrest.

Clashes through the night

The two parties that swept Sunday's poll are supportive of the current president and hostile towards his predecessor.

But both were viewed by rival parties of coordinating a massive vote-buying campaign.

Monday's clashes began after an initially peaceful rally held by losing parties spun out of control.

Police attempted to disperse protesters when they first attempted to force their way to the main government building, known as the White House, on Monday evening.

At one point a Radio Free Europe live feed showed police throwing stun grenades as they

struggled to push back protesters, who appeared to have set several bins on fire in one particularly fierce exchange.

Health authorities said at least 120 people were being treated for injuries, but there were no reports of deaths by late Monday.

Opposition supporters had called for a re-run of Sunday's election after an international monitoring mission organized by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe called "credible allegations" of vote-buying.

The preliminary count showed two pro-presidency parties, Birimdik and Mekenim Kyrgyzstan, who both favor deeper integration with Moscow, together taking around half of the vote.

Birimdik, which includes the president's younger brother Asylbek Jeenbekov, said it was open to a re-run of the vote on Monday, but by that time police were already struggling to bring protesters under control.

Opposition parties earlier distanced themselves from the first attempt to storm the government complex.

Ata-Meken member Elvira Surabaldiyeva told AFP her party had no role in the incident, which she blamed on "provocateurs."

But she added that her party would "stand with the people to the end."

'Jeenbekov out'

Mobile phone and mobile internet connections were poor or non-existent as the night unfolded.

Eyewitnesses told AFP that shop owners in the vicinity of the protest had begun removing goods from their stores in anticipation of possible looting.

Looting was a feature in two popular uprisings that overthrew authoritarian presidents in 2005 and 2010, but the former Soviet country has enjoyed relative stability for the last decade.

Dissatisfaction with corruption and the domination of politics by powerful clans has increased with the economic challenges of the coronavirus fallout.

Thousands had gathered in central Bishkek for Monday's protest to denounce the results of the latest vote.

Popular singers joined politicians in addressing the crowd, who responded with chants of "Jeenbekov out."

"The president promised to oversee honest elections. He didn't keep his word," one opposition candidate, Ryskeldi Mombekov, told the protesters.

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