



Opportunities and Challenges Await Kyrgyzstan's Incoming President

The inauguration of Kyrgyzstan's new president on 24 November is a tribute to the country's parliamentary democracy. But to overcome continued vulnerability, Sooronbai Jeenbekov must manage powerful southern elites, define the role of religion in society and spearhead reconciliation with Central Asian neighbours Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Sooronbai Jeenbekov will be inaugurated as Kyrgyzstan's fifth president on 24 November, the victor of a tight, unpredictable, contested but ultimately legitimate election. The new leader, a loyal member of the ruling Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK), won 54 per cent of the vote and gained a majority in every province but Talas – the home of the defeated main opposition candidate Omurbek Babanov.

As president, Jeenbekov will face a number of challenges and opportunities, both at home and in Central Asia. The state Committee for National Security (GKNB) on 4 November opened an investigation against Babanov for inciting ethnic hatred based on a speech he made on 28 September in an ethnic-Uzbek area of Osh, a city in southern Kyrgyzstan's Ferghana Valley. Babanov called on Uzbeks to defend their rights and for any Kyrgyz police officers who harassed Uzbeks to be dismissed.

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Some observers see the GKNB case as politically motivated.

While tensions remain high in Osh, the epicentre of violent ethnic clashes that left 400 mostly Uzbeks dead in June 2010, unrest could also occur elsewhere. Babanov travelled abroad after the campaign, but if he returns he could be arrested at the airport, raising the possibility of protests in his stronghold of Talas, a city 300km west of Bishkek. His arrest and trial would undermine Kyrgyzstan's international credibility, lay bare the politicisation of the security services and the judiciary, and show unwillingness to tackle deep-seated inter-ethnic issues in the south.

Former President Almazbek Atambayev, also from the SDPK, was sometimes unpredictable but managed to balance competing regional and business interests inside Kyrgyzstan, key factors in the ousting of Presidents Kurmanbek Bakiev in 2010 and Askar Akayev in 2005. Jeenbekov will have to replicate this balancing act and make a strategic decision whether or not to reestablish central government control in Osh, which operates like a fiefdom. The latter risks upsetting heavy-weight figures in the south with vested interests, but in the long term, a failure to do so will perpetuate internal political tensions.

The new president will also have the opportunity to shape the debate about the role of religion in society. For too long – and much like other Central Asian states – Kyrgyzstan has overly securitised its response to those practising non-traditional forms of Islam, creating tensions and resentments, while politicians

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leading a secular state make public displays of piety integral to their political personas. Kyrgyzstan is widely perceived as an easy target for terrorist activity, as the August 2016 attack on the Chinese embassy demonstrated. It will be essential to find a balance between assessing what are real risks and what are questions of religious freedoms and civil rights.

As soon as he takes office, Jeenbekov should make every effort to repair Kyrgyzstan’s relationship with Kazakhstan, which deteriorated spectacularly after President Atambayev accused Astana of meddling in the Kyrgyz presidential election to bolster Babanov. Astana responded by introducing strict customs controls on the Kyrgyz-Kazakh border citing concerns about Chinese goods being smuggled through Kyrgyzstan. The disruption on the border is negatively affecting Kyrgyzstan’s economy and Kyrgyzstan has complained to the World Trade Organization and to the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, a trade bloc of which Kazakhstan is a founding member. Russia has so far failed to make any meaningful comment on the standoff.

The degree to which Kazakhstan is motivated by anger at Atambayev or genuine concerns about cross-border smuggling is unclear. Still, it will fall to Jeenbekov to spearhead a reconciliation. How open-minded Kazakhstan will be to resolving the spat will also depend on whether or not they see Jeenbekov as a strong, independent leader or merely Atambayev’s puppet.

There is now scope to improve relations with Uzbekistan in a way that was unimaginable before President Shavkat Mirziyoyev took office in December 2016. Much of the initiative

is coming from the Uzbek side but the amount of progress made between the two states is remarkable. Regional cooperation, in the long term, will foster stability in Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan can play a leading role in both practicing and promoting the type of cooperation that defuses tensions in border areas and over shared resources such as water and energy. By doing so Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan can provide a model of collaboration and peacebuilding in the region.

Kyrgyzstan is still a young parliamentary democracy in a difficult neighbourhood. If Jeenbekov is to continue Atambayev’s program of fighting corruption, efforts need to extend beyond targeting the SDPK’s political opponents. Kyrgyzstan and its partners should begin to address how corruption in politics can be tackled. Beyond the technical success of casting votes electronically, there are many opportunities for illegal practices. Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) election observers said the presidential elections were legitimate, but local concerns focus on arrests of opposition figures, vote buying and the misuse of administrative resources.

Having been the first country in Central Asia to see a president voluntarily leave his post at the end of his constitutionally mandated term, Kyrgyzstan is in many respects light years ahead of its neighbours. Tajikistan could be facing a potentially destabilising transition in 2020, and Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev, 77, cannot hold power forever. Any regional stress will be quickly felt in Bishkek, another reason that Jeenbekov should focus on bolstering Kyrgyzstan’s long-term stability while the situation is calm.