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## **KYRGYZSTAN: CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM FIX SAILING THROUGH PARLIAMENT**

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Kyrgyzstans parliament has passed a second reading of draft bill on holding a referendum in December on making changes to the constitution.

With the MPs vote on September 22, the likelihood of a plebiscite going ahead on December 4, as planned, has become a virtual certainty. Third readings are typically a formality and President Almazbek Atambayev has already thrown his weight behind amendments that have sown political turmoil in the country.

Of the 104 deputies that voted, 98 were in support of the referendum initiative, while six opposed.

Proposals to tinker with the constitution have come in for strong criticism from civil society as well as from international bodies like the Venice Commission, an advisory body to the European Council that rules on matters of constitutional law.

One key provision of the reform would see the role of prime minister being bolstered at the expense of the parliament. This has raised suspicions that Atambayev, who is limited constitutionally to one presidential term ending in 2017, may be laying the grounds for his immediate entourage to retain a dominant grip over power.

Another fix seen as insidious is one envisioning the introduction of loosely conceived supreme state values that would encompass individual human rights but also tag on concepts like love of the Motherland, respect for the elderly and the accommodation of tradition and progress. The ultimate goal of this aspect of the reform appears intended at chipping away at the individual human rights agenda that many governments in the post-Soviet space see as inimical to their model of authoritarian political development.

Since this will all be subject to a referendum, it could all fail, but as the Venice Commission has noted, the lack of clarity in the terms of constitutional reforms means it is unlikely that voters will be able to make an informed decision.

Citizens will not have a clear idea of the changes that they are expected to decide on in a referendum. Asking citizens to engage in such a blind vote would dilute the very purpose of popular referenda, and should be avoided, the commission noted in an evaluation of the proposed amendments in late August.

The Venice Commission urged a open and transparent public discussion on the planned changes, but the government has on the contrary pulled out all the stop to cow objectors into submission.

Atambayev has repeatedly smeared prominent activists in his public speeches, while more recently authorities have floated the idea of criminal probes against allies-turned-foes of the president who objected to the constitutional changes.

That stance suggests the government is intent on steamrolling its constitutional amendments through – an act of marginalizing the opposition that has in previous years translated into unrest and turmoil.

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Kaynak/Source: