
KYRGYZSTAN VOTE TO TEST STABILITY OF REGION'S POLITICAL ODDBALL

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03.10.2017

Channel News Asia, 03 Oct 2017

Storming through a crowded bazaar in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, presidential candidate Toktayim Umetalieva is in her element, hugging babies and female traders.

Unlike the two male contenders viewed as favourites to win the hotly contested presidential election on Oct 15, 55-year-old Umetalieva is no newcomer to the ballot, but she will be a rank outsider.

The combative rights activist first ran for president in 2005, just after Kyrgyzstan's autocratic first president Askar Akayev was toppled by street protests.

Her second attempt was in 2009, a year before Akayev's successor Kurmanbek Bakiyev was ousted, triggering political violence and ethnic clashes that left hundreds dead.

With its political upheaval and noisy election campaigns, Kyrgyzstan is the odd man out among Central Asia's five ex-Soviet states, the most democratic country in a predominantly authoritarian region.

The presidential poll will have 12 candidates on the ballot, 11 of them men, and Umetalieva has stressed the need to ensure a smooth handover.

"In the history of Kyrgyzstan, there has never been a peaceful transition of power from one president to another" through elections, Umetalieva said.

Kyrgyzstan's 61-year-old incumbent President Almazbek Atambayev is constitutionally prohibited from another term in office and has said he wants to retire and take up the piano.

The Muslim-majority republic of six million people sits firmly in Russia's political orbit and looks to China for much-needed investment in industry and infrastructure.

The election is unlikely to change either of those long-term trends and the West's influence in the country has waned since Atambayev's government called time on a US military base used in Afghanistan operations three years ago.

But a peaceful passing of the baton from Atambayev to his successor in a vote endorsed by international monitors might go some way to resurrecting the country's one-time nickname of the "Island of Democracy".

POWER VERSUS MONEY

"The clash here is between power and money, and such clashes carry risks," said Umetalieva, who has never won more than two per cent of the vote.

There are two clear favourites among the dozen candidates campaigning for a six-year term.

Sooronbai Jeenbekov, 58, is running for the party affiliated with the outgoing Atambayev, and is likely to benefit from its considerable influence over the state machine.

His main rival is charismatic 47-year-old opposition MP Omurbek Babanov, a former oil trader and reportedly one of the country's richest men who is promising reforms.

The race's probable third horse is Temir Sariyev, who, like Jeenbekov and Babanov, served as prime minister under Atambayev.

"These recent years have been very difficult," Sariyev told AFP.

"But the world knows Kyrgyzstan as a freedom-loving country. We won't kneel before dictators and tyrants."

SCORE-SETTLING BEFORE VOTE

A new biometric identification system introduced ahead of 2015 parliamentary elections has reduced the scope for violations on election day, but Atambayev's increasingly autocratic tendencies have raised concerns.

Civil suits targeting media outlets critical of the government have piled up ahead of the vote and two of Atambayev's rivals have been jailed, highlighting the lack of an independent judiciary and a political culture still based on score-settling.

There has also been speculation the government will use all its administrative levers to ensure that Jeenbekov wins in the first round.

But Edil Baisalov, a former government chief of staff turned opposition-minded political commentator said the present government "doesn't have the resources" to engineer the crushing electoral majorities of the past.

"One state television channel used to be our only source of information and we used to smuggle 10 or 20 copies of independent newspapers into remote areas. Now half the country is on Facebook. I almost feel sorry for this government," he told AFP.

Baisalov said he hopes the incumbent president's declared wish for a peaceful retreat will act as a check on unfair play during the election.

"The people of Kyrgyzstan will accept any outcome as long as it is believable and the government has not been too dirty. If the opposite is the case, they will take to the streets and city squares once more," he told AFP.