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## Freedom in the World 2010 - Kyrgyzstan

**Capital:** Bishkek

**Population:** 5,304,000

Political Rights Score: 6 \*

Civil Liberties Score: 5 \*

Status: Not Free

### Status Change Explanation

Kyrgyzstan's political rights rating declined from 5 to 6, its civil liberties rating from 4 to 5, and its status from Partly Free to Not Free due to a flawed presidential election, the concentration of power in the executive branch, and new legal restrictions on freedom of religion.

### Overview

**President Kurmanbek Bakiyev secured a new term in a flawed presidential election in July, retaining power amid a continuing deterioration of basic freedoms and a disturbing string of violent incidents targeting journalists and politicians. A new law restricted freedom of religion during the year, and former officials faced what appeared to be politically motivated criminal prosecutions.**

Shortly after Kyrgyzstan gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Askar Akayev, a respected physicist, was elected president. He easily won reelection in 1995, and constitutional amendments the following year substantially increased the powers of the presidency. International observers noted serious irregularities in the 2000 parliamentary and presidential elections, which yielded another term for Akayev.

Long-standing frustrations in the economically depressed and politically marginalized south culminated in public protests in 2002. Six protesters were killed when police fired into a crowd in the village of Aksy. Four former regional prosecutors and police officials were sentenced to prison in December in connection with the shootings, and additional convictions came five years later, but opposition critics continued to argue that senior officials who authorized the use of force were never brought to justice.

After flawed February 2005 parliamentary elections, thousands of demonstrators took to the streets across the country to protest irregularities and ultimately call for Akayev's resignation. On March 24, protesters and opposition supporters stormed the presidential headquarters in Bishkek. Akayev fled abroad and later resigned.

In the July 2005 presidential poll, former prime minister and opposition leader Kurmanbek Bakiyev captured 89 percent of the vote. His victory was regarded as nearly inevitable after he and Feliks Kulov, his most serious rival, formed a political alliance in May: Kulov withdrew his presidential candidacy in exchange for the post of prime

minister. Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) nevertheless concluded that the election "marked tangible progress ... towards meeting OSCE commitments."

The Bakiyev-Kulov alliance held until early 2007, when Kulov joined the opposition. In April, opposition groups organized demonstrations in Bishkek calling for constitutional reform and Bakiyev's resignation. However, after demonstrators allegedly attacked police, the authorities violently dispersed the protests, dealing the opposition a significant blow.

In October 2007, referendum voters approved a new constitution that expanded the parliament from 75 to 90 seats and introduced party-slate balloting. The hastily called referendum drew criticism from civil society groups, which pointed to the government's use of administrative resources to ensure a favorable outcome.

Bakiyev dissolved the parliament the day after the referendum, and a progovernment party called Ak Zhol was quickly formed to contest elections in December. The disputed balloting, dubbed a "missed opportunity" by OSCE observers and held under new legislation, produced a parliament dominated by Ak Zhol and devoid of opposition representation. Amendments pushed through the new legislature later that month widened the executive's authority, and a government formed in the final days of 2007 was stacked with Bakiyev loyalists.

The president consolidated his power in 2008, sidelining the country's remaining well-known opposition figures. Kulov's departure from politics in May, when Bakiyev appointed him as head of an energy development project, reflected the broader disappearance of a viable political opposition.

In March 2009, Medet Sadyrkulov, Bakiyev's former chief of staff, was found dead in a burned-out car near Bishkek. Opposition representatives charged that Sadyrkulov, who had left the government earlier in the year, was assassinated because he was planning to join the opposition. His relatives asked for an additional investigation in May after initial inquiries failed to clarify the circumstances of his death.

Bakiyev won another five-year term in the July presidential election, taking 75 percent of the vote. OSCE observers concluded that the poll failed to meet international standards, citing evidence of fraud, intimidation of opposition supporters, and the misuse of administrative resources, among other problems.

Kyrgyzstan continued to balance strategic and economic relations with Russia and the United States in 2009. In February, after receiving \$2 billion in loan guarantees from Russia, the Kyrgyz government threatened to evict the U.S. military from a base at Manas airport. It then agreed in June to let U.S. forces remain in exchange for significantly higher rent payments.

### **Political Rights and Civil Liberties**

Kyrgyzstan is not an electoral democracy. The 2005 presidential election drew praise for making substantial progress over previous elections, but international observers found serious flaws in the 2007 parliamentary and 2009 presidential elections.

Constitutional changes adopted in the hastily organized 2007 referendum expanded the unicameral parliament from 75 to 90 deputies, with party-list voting replacing single-member districts. Both president and parliament serve five-year terms, and the majority party in the parliament nominates the prime minister.

The pro-presidential Ak Zhol party holds 71 of the 90 seats, and the only other parties represented – the Social Democratic Party, with 11 seats, and the Kyrgyzstan Communist Party, with 8 – generally cooperate with the government. The fragmented opposition's periodic attempts to unite have only underscored the weakness of alternative forces.

Corruption is pervasive in Kyrgyz society, and bribes are frequently required to obtain lucrative government positions. The nepotistic practices of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, whose sons and brothers are prominent in business and government, were

evident in the October 2009 appointment of his son Maksim as head of the Central Agency for Development. Kyrgyzstan was ranked 162 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

A variety of private print and broadcast outlets continue to operate alongside state-run television and radio stations, but the government has stepped up pressure on independent journalism in recent years, using licensing rules, criminal libel laws, and various forms of administrative harassment to suppress media scrutiny. Journalists have also faced increased extralegal harassment and violent attacks. Osh-based journalist Alisher Saipov, who ran an Uzbek-language newspaper that was critical of Uzbekistan's government, was killed in October 2007; the Kyrgyz government has failed to investigate the murder vigorously, although police said in October 2009 that they were seeking a suspect. Correspondent Syrgak Abdyldayev of the independent weekly *Reporter-Bishkek* was stabbed in March 2009 and left the country in August after receiving threats. Osh-based journalist Kubanychbek Joldoshev was beaten in November. U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty remained barred from the country's television and FM radio airwaves in 2009 after refusing in 2008 to submit programming for government screening before broadcast. In December, journalist Gennady Pavlyuk, who wrote for several newspapers in Kyrgyzstan, died in Almaty, Kazakhstan, after he was thrown from a window with his arms and legs bound with duct tape. After Pavlyuk's murder, the OSCE called on the Kyrgyz government to acknowledge a "safety crisis of Kyrgyzstan's press." The government has reportedly blocked some websites, but the primary obstacles to widespread internet access are economic and infrastructural.

The government has generally respected freedom of religion, but all religious organizations must register with the Ministry of Justice, a process that is often cumbersome. In January 2009, the president signed a new law that banned proselytizing, the distribution of religious literature in public places, and private religious education. The measure also requires at least 200 signatures to register a religious organization. The government monitors and restricts Islamist groups that it regards as a threat to national security, particularly Hizb ut-Tahrir, an ostensibly nonviolent international movement calling for the creation of a caliphate. In March 2009, the government banned the wearing of headscarves in schools.

Corruption is widespread in the educational system, and bribes are often required to obtain admission to schools or universities. Teachers have reportedly been forced to subscribe to government newspapers, and authorities in some municipalities require schoolchildren to perform during national holidays and visits by government officials.

The government has tightened restrictions on freedom of assembly in recent years. In August 2008, Bakiyev signed legislation requiring organizers to give the authorities 12 days' notice before all gatherings and allowing officials to ban protests on ill-defined grounds. Police blocked protests after the July 2009 presidential election.

Freedom of association is typically upheld, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) participate actively in social and political life. However, since 2007, they have made plausible claims that the authorities are attempting to exclude them as part of a broad push against alternative political and civic voices. Kyrgyz NGOs noted in a November 2008 statement that nine journalists and human rights activists had sought or received political asylum abroad in the previous two years.

The law provides for the formation of trade unions, and unions are generally able to operate without obstruction. However, strikes are prohibited in many sectors, and the Federation of Trade Unions has reportedly fallen under the political influence of the government. Legal enforcement of union rights is weak, and collective bargaining agreements are not always respected by employers.

Despite the enactment of various reform measures, the judiciary is not independent and remains dominated by the executive branch. Corruption among judges, who are underpaid, is widespread. Defendants' rights, including the presumption of innocence, are not always respected, and there are credible reports of violence against suspects during arrest and interrogation.

Two former officials faced charges in 2009 that appeared to be politically motivated. In June, former foreign minister and current opposition member Alikbek Jekshenkulov went on trial for a 2007 murder. Former defense minister Ismail Isakov went on trial on corruption charges in November.

Ethnic minority groups, including Uzbeks, Russians, and Uighurs, have complained of discrimination in employment and housing. Members of the country's sizable Uzbek minority, concentrated in the south, have long demanded more political and cultural rights, including greater representation in government, more Uzbek-language schools, and official status for the Uzbek language.

The government, which abolished the Soviet-era exit-visa system in 1999, generally respects the right of unrestricted travel to and from the country. There are barriers to internal migration, however, including a requirement that citizens obtain permits to work and settle in particular areas of the country.

Personal connections, corruption, organized crime, and widespread poverty limit business competition and equality of opportunity. Conscripted soldiers have reportedly been rented out to civilian employers under illegal arrangements, with some forced to work for no pay.

Cultural traditions and apathy among law enforcement officials discourage victims of domestic violence and rape from contacting the authorities. The trafficking of women and girls into forced prostitution abroad is a serious problem, and some victims report that the authorities are involved in trafficking. The practice of bride abduction persists despite being illegal, and few perpetrators are prosecuted. Women are well represented in the workforce, the parliament (where they hold nearly a third of all seats), and institutions of higher learning, but poor economic conditions have had a negative effect on women's professional and educational opportunities.

*\*Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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