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**NEW PRESIDENT, OLD POLITICAL SYSTEM:
KYRGYZSTAN'S CONTINUING DESCENT INTO AUTHORITARIANISM**

The political development of contemporary Kyrgyzstan demonstrates a pronounced and continuing movement away from the comparatively pluralistic political system that distinguished the country from many of its Central Asian neighbors during the earlier decades of independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991.

Since the political upheaval of 2020 and the rise of Sadyr Japarov to the presidency in January 2021, political authority has become increasingly concentrated in the executive branch, while institutional checks and balances, parliamentary influence, independent journalism, civil society, and the space available for organized political opposition have substantially weakened. Constitutional changes adopted in 2021 strengthened presidential authority, while subsequent political and legal developments have increasingly enabled law enforcement agencies, security services, and other state institutions to exercise broad powers against individuals and organizations regarded as critical of the government.

This authoritarian transformation has been accompanied by an increasingly restrictive approach toward political dissent. Opposition politicians, activists, journalists, civil society representatives, and other government critics have faced surveillance, searches, interrogation, detention, criminal prosecution, imprisonment, and other forms of coercive pressure. Particularly significant is the increasing use of criminal and administrative mechanisms against individuals whose activities challenge government policies, expose alleged corruption, criticize senior officials, participate in opposition movements, or mobilize public protest. The cases involving

members of Butun Kyrgyzstan, the SDPK and its successor Social Democrats movement illustrate a broader pattern in which political opposition has increasingly become associated with personal vulnerability to state scrutiny and punitive action.

The developments between 2023 and 2026 indicate that this process has accelerated rather than diminished. Pressure on independent media and civil society has intensified, journalists and opposition figures have been detained, opposition party offices have been searched, and legislation modeled on Russia's restrictive "foreign agents" framework has expanded governmental control over nongovernmental organizations. At the same time, Kyrgyzstan's close political, military, intelligence, and security relationship with Russia provides an important regional context for understanding the strengthening of authoritarian practices and security-oriented methods of political control. The resulting political environment is one in which criticism of the government and organized opposition activity may increasingly be interpreted not as legitimate exercises of political rights but as challenges to state authority and political stability.

The new revolution brought Sadyr Japarov to power, and he was officially elected president in January 2021. Before assuming the presidency, Japarov had been convicted and sentenced to a lengthy prison term for orchestrating the kidnapping of a provincial governor, although he maintained that the charges were politically motivated. His critics portrayed him as a corrupt nationalist with alleged connections to organized crime. The presidential election was accompanied by scattered reports of voting irregularities, while election authorities reported turnout of approximately 39 percent. Political analyst Arkady Dubnov characterized Japarov as a populist "Robin Hood" figure who rose to power by promising rapid relief from the country's

social and economic problems and warned that further political upheaval in Kyrgyzstan was likely.¹

Like other increasingly authoritarian governments, the Kyrgyz authorities have imposed substantial restrictions on freedom of speech and access to independent information. In 2020, journalists were subjected to harassment by law enforcement authorities and, in some cases, threatened with criminal prosecution for critical reporting. Journalists were also attacked while covering the political unrest of October 2020, including incidents involving police officers and hostile individuals. These developments reflected the increasingly difficult environment confronting journalists and independent media engaged in critical reporting.²

Political corruption remains deeply entrenched in Kyrgyzstan. President Sadyr Japarov himself has faced serious allegations of corruption. His former associate Melis Aspekov alleged that Japarov received \$10 million from former President Sooronbai Jeenbekov to finance his presidential campaign in exchange for security guarantees and that unregistered funds were used during the campaign. Aspekov made these allegations while being held in pretrial detention in connection with an extortion investigation.



Photo of Melis Aspekov with bruises in detention.

¹ Ivan Nechepurenko. Populist, Prisoner, President: A Convicted Kidnapper Wins Kyrgyzstan Election. The New York Times, January 21, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/10/world/europe/kyrgyzstan-election.html>

² Kyrgyzstan: Events of 2020. Human Rights Watch, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/kyrgyzstan#>

https://24.kg/obschestvo/193928_melis_aspekov_pojalovalsya_napyitki_vsizo_gknb/

Photographs subsequently circulated showing extensive bruising on Aspekov's body while in custody, raising serious concerns regarding his treatment in detention.³

In May 2021, the State Committee for National Security, known as the GKNB, arrested former Prime Minister Omurbek Babanov, a prominent government critic who had accused the authorities of corruption and political manipulation. His arrest was widely regarded by his supporters as politically motivated.⁴

The government has demonstrated increasing intolerance toward political criticism. On September 10, 2021, Orozayym Narmatova, an activist associated with the opposition Butun Kyrgyzstan party, was detained at Osh airport and taken to Bishkek. The Ministry of Internal Affairs specifically referred to her negative statements concerning the authorities and accused her of attempting to discredit the government and create negative public opinion. The case illustrates how criticism of state authorities can attract law enforcement attention and potentially serious official consequences.⁵

The authorities have also responded aggressively to organized political protest and disagreement with government policy. On October 23, 2022, twenty-one individuals were

³ Zhibek Begalieva. Бывший соратник Жапарова обвинил его в получении взятки в \$10 миллионов от бывшего президента. Оппозиция требует отставки политика. (A former associate of Japarov accused him of accepting a \$ 10 million bribe from the former president. The opposition demands the resignation of the politician.) Nastoiashchee vremia, May 14, 2021. <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/byvshiy-soratnik-zhaparova-obvinil-ego-v-poluchenii-vzyatki-v-10-millionov-oppozitsiya-trebuot-otstavki-prezidenta/31255302.html>

⁴ В Кыргызстане арестован бывший премьер страны Омурбек Бабанов (Former Prime Minister Omurbek Babanov arrested in Kyrgyzstan). Sputnik, June 2, 2021. <https://ru.sputnik.kz/society/20210602/17232462/V-Kyrgyzstane-arestovan-byvshiy.html>

⁵ В Кыргызстане из-за критики власти задержали члена партии "Бутун Кыргызстан" Нарматову (In Kyrgyzstan, authorities detain member of Butun Kyrgyzstan party Narmatova due to criticism). Nastoiashchee vremia, September 10, 2021. <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/kyrgyzstan-zaderzhali-butun-kyrgyzstan-oroazayym-narmatovu/31453684.html>

detained because of their opposition to a proposed Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border agreement. Those detained included a military general, a former Constitutional Court member, a former prosecutor, journalists, and activists, and police searched their homes.⁶

Freedom House has documented the broader deterioration of Kyrgyzstan's political system following the upheaval surrounding the annulled 2020 parliamentary elections. Constitutional changes adopted in 2021 substantially strengthened presidential authority, concentrated political power in the presidency, and reduced the size and role of parliament. At the same time, the judiciary and coercive mechanisms have increasingly been used against political opponents and civil society critics. These developments have substantially weakened the institutional checks that might otherwise provide protection against politically motivated governmental action.⁷

Russia and Kyrgyzstan maintain a close political and security relationship rooted in longstanding historical connections and reinforced through military, intelligence, and counterterrorism cooperation. Kyrgyzstan is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization alongside Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Kyrgyzstan continued and, in several areas, deepened its relationship with Russia, including military cooperation.⁸

As a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Kyrgyzstan receives Russian military assistance and training, while Moscow maintains an important strategic presence through the Kant Air Base. Russia and Kyrgyzstan also conduct joint military exercises,

⁶ Kyrgyz Protesters Demand Release Of Border Deal Critics. Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, October 24, 2022. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-border-deal-critics-detained/32098285.html>

⁷ Kyrgyzstan. Freedom House, 2023. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kyrgyzstan/freedom-world/2023>

⁸ Kyrgyzstan seeks to deepen allied relations with Russia. TASS, June 9, 2022. <https://tass.com/world/1462763>; Russia to 'Develop' Its Military Facilities in Kyrgyzstan. The Moscow Times, May 11, 2023. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/05/08/russia-to-develop-its-military-facilities-in-kyrgyzstan-a81071>

exchange intelligence, and cooperate on cross-border security threats. These relationships provide Russia with considerable influence within Kyrgyzstan's security environment. Russian influence also extends to Kyrgyzstan's law enforcement and internal security structures. Russian security agencies provide training and technological assistance to Kyrgyz personnel in areas that include surveillance and cyber defense. This cooperation has strengthened border controls and security capabilities but has also raised concerns that closer relations with Russia facilitate the adoption of increasingly restrictive methods of monitoring opposition figures and suppressing political dissent. Russia therefore remains Kyrgyzstan's principal security partner and an important source of political and institutional influence.⁹

The authorities have increasingly used criminal law against political opponents. In December 2023, Chynygul Sherkulova, a member of the opposition Butun Kyrgyzstan party, was sentenced to three years in prison for allegedly disseminating false information online. The charge arose from a social media post concerning the alleged transfer of Kyrgyz territory to Tajikistan. Adakhan Madumarov, leader of Butun Kyrgyzstan, had been detained since September 2023 in connection with a Kyrgyz-Tajik border agreement that he signed in 2009 while serving as head of the Security Council. These cases illustrate the serious legal consequences that may confront prominent opposition figures and government critics.¹⁰ Another significant target of government pressure has been the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan, or SDPK, and the Social Democrats movement that continued many of its political objectives following the party's fragmentation. For many years, the SDPK was among Kyrgyzstan's most influential political parties and played a central role during the presidency of

⁹ Russian influence in Kyrgyzstan rising despite local consternation. Voice of America, May 5, 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/russian-influence-in-kyrgyzstan-rising-despite-local-consternation/7598553>.

¹⁰ Kyrgyz Opposition Party Member Gets Three Years In Prison For Online Post. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 18, 2024. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-opposition-prison-fake-news/32782036.html>

Almazbek Atambayev. Following the political rupture between Atambayev and his successor, President Sooronbay Jeenbekov, the party moved into opposition. In March 2019, the SDPK formally declared itself an opposition force and began openly challenging government policies, criticizing state authorities, and advocating alternative political and economic reforms.¹¹ Politicians, activists, and supporters associated with the SDPK and its successor organizations subsequently faced arrests, criminal investigations, searches, detention, and other forms of official pressure.

The political upheaval following the 2020 elections substantially transformed the opposition landscape, including through divisions within the SDPK and the emergence of successor organizations. Despite these structural changes, many politicians and activists associated with the party continued their opposition activities and remained outspoken critics of the government. In subsequent years, these individuals increasingly faced law enforcement actions, criminal investigations, searches, arrests, and detention.¹² A particularly significant example occurred in November 2024, shortly before municipal elections in Bishkek, when authorities detained Social Democrats leader Temirlan Sultanbekov, former parliamentarian Irina Karamushkina, and party activist Roza Turksever and searched party offices. These actions substantially affected the party's ability to participate in the electoral process and raised serious concerns regarding the increasing use of state institutions against organized political opposition.¹³

¹¹ SDPK declares itself opposition to authorities. 24.kg2, March 18, 2019.

https://24.kg/english/112194_SDPK_declares_itself_opposition_to_authorities/

¹² Politically motivated prosecutions amid declining media and civic space. Civicus, 2026.

<https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/politically-motivated-prosecutions-amid-declining-media-and-civic-space/>

¹³ Syinat Sultanalieva. Kyrgyzstan is Relentless in its Crackdown on Civil and Political Rights. Human Rights Watch, December 10, 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/10/kyrgyzstan-relentless-its-crackdown-civil-and-political-rights>



Kyrgyzstan Social Democrats party leader Temirlan Sultanbekov (L), chief campaigner Irina Karamushkina (C), and party member Roza Tyurksever after being detained in Bishkek on November 15, 2024.

The SDPK and its successor organizations have increasingly become targets of criminal investigations, detention, and other coercive measures directed against opposition politicians and activists. In the period preceding the snap parliamentary elections of November 30, 2025, the authorities intensified pressure on members of the opposition Social Democrats party. On November 22, security services arrested ten prominent opposition figures on allegations that they were plotting the violent overthrow of the government. Among those detained was Kadyrbek Atambayev, the son of former President Almazbek Atambayev. Other opposition politicians and members of their families were reportedly subjected to prolonged interrogation without access to legal counsel, while those arrested were placed in pretrial detention pending further proceedings.

These developments form part of a broader pattern of increasing pressure on opposition movements and government critics. The prosecution and detention of Social Democrat figures have reinforced concerns regarding the rapidly shrinking space for organized political opposition

in Kyrgyzstan and the increasing use of law enforcement mechanisms against individuals associated with opposition political activity.¹⁴

Although pressure against opposition groups during election periods has occurred previously in Kyrgyzstan, the scale of the arrests, seriousness of the accusations, and limited public disclosure of supporting evidence distinguish these developments from many earlier cases. Their timing immediately before a national election raised additional concerns regarding the fairness of the electoral environment and the ability of opposition parties to participate effectively in the political process. These developments reflect a continuing contraction of political space and an increasingly restrictive environment for opposition movements and government critics.

Within the broader context of declining political pluralism and expanding executive authority under President Sadyr Japarov, members and supporters of the SDPK and affiliated opposition movements have become particularly vulnerable to heightened state scrutiny, criminal investigations, legal pressure, detention, and other punitive measures connected with their political activities and criticism of the government.

Once frequently characterized as an “island of democracy” within predominantly authoritarian Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan has experienced a substantial deterioration in political freedoms. Since 2021, the country has been categorized as an authoritarian state by the Economist Intelligence Unit, while its international press freedom standing has also deteriorated significantly. These changes reflect the broader weakening of democratic institutions, political pluralism, independent journalism, and protections for government critics.¹⁵

¹⁴ Kyrgyzstan. International Idea, December 2025. <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/country/kyrgyzstan>

¹⁵ Despite Detention and Forced Deportation, Still Investigating High-Level Corruption in Kyrgyzstan. Global Investigative Journalist Network. March 28, 2024. <https://gijn.org/stories/investigating-high-level-corruption-kyrgyzstan/>

Between 2023 and 2026, Kyrgyzstan’s human rights environment deteriorated further as the authorities intensified pressure on independent media and civil society and substantially narrowed civic and political space. In January 2024, police raided independent newsrooms and detained journalists. In April 2024, President Sadyr Japarov signed a “foreign representatives” law modeled on Russia’s “foreign agents” framework, imposing additional controls on nongovernmental organizations. Pressure on independent media, journalists, civil society organizations, and political critics continued through 2025 and 2026. These developments reflect an increasingly authoritarian political system characterized by the concentration of executive authority, restrictions on freedom of expression and association, pressure against organized political opposition, and the growing use of law enforcement and security institutions against individuals who criticize or challenge the government.¹⁶

The developments examined above demonstrate that the deterioration of political freedoms in Kyrgyzstan is not adequately understood as a collection of isolated incidents involving individual politicians, journalists, activists, or opposition organizations. Rather, they reflect a broader structural transformation of the political system characterized by the concentration of executive authority, weakening of institutional constraints, shrinking political pluralism, restrictions on independent media and civil society, and an expanding role for law enforcement and security institutions in controlling political activity. The cumulative effect has been to substantially narrow the boundaries of permissible criticism and increase the personal risks confronting individuals who openly challenge the government, expose alleged corruption, participate in opposition organizations, or mobilize public resistance to official policies.

¹⁶ Kyrgyzstan: Politically Motivated Prosecutions Amid Declining Media and Civic Space. IPHR, May 28, 2025. <https://iphronline.org/articles/kyrgyzstan-politically-motivated-prosecutions-amid-declining-media-and-civic-space/>

Particularly significant is the progression from pressure against individual critics to increasingly systematic measures affecting organized political opposition. The arrests and prosecutions of opposition figures, searches of party offices, detention of activists shortly before elections, questioning of family members, restrictions on independent media, and expansion of governmental control over civil society demonstrate the breadth of the state's coercive capacity. Within such an environment, criminal investigations and other law enforcement measures may acquire an explicitly political function by intimidating critics, disrupting opposition organizations, discouraging participation in antigovernment activities, and communicating to the broader population the potential consequences of challenging those in power.

Contemporary Kyrgyzstan increasingly exhibits the institutional characteristics of a consolidated authoritarian system in which political loyalty and conformity have assumed growing importance, while effective mechanisms for protecting government critics have substantially weakened. Individuals identified with opposition parties or movements, particularly those with a visible record of antigovernment activity or criticism of senior officials, consequently face heightened vulnerability to surveillance, interrogation, searches, arbitrary detention, criminal prosecution, imprisonment, and other coercive measures. The developments documented from 2020 through 2026 demonstrate a sustained trajectory toward greater concentration of political power and increasingly restrictive authoritarian governance rather than a temporary response to isolated periods of political instability. The hopes that Kyrgyzstan would develop into a stable democratic state have not materialized. Instead, the country's political evolution has moved progressively away from democratic pluralism, institutional accountability, and meaningful political competition. Current political trends provide little basis for expecting a significant democratic transformation in the foreseeable future, and Kyrgyzstan is likely to

remain an authoritarian state characterized by concentrated executive authority, restricted political competition, and limited tolerance for organized opposition and public criticism.

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