

Kyrgyzstan Renews Attempts to Build Coalition Government

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BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan — Kyrgyzstan's new parliament launched a second attempt to build a coalition government Saturday, seeking to avoid repeat elections in the volatile Central Asian state.

President Roza Otunbayeva on Saturday instructed the head of a new political party to form a coalition after the previous alliance collapsed, in a setback to the region's first parliamentary democracy.

Omurbek Babanov, leader of the Respublika party, will have 15 working days to unite three of the five parties in parliament, said Otunbayeva's spokesman, Inasultan Kanazarov.

Kyrgyzstan, a former Soviet republic that hosts Russian and U.S. military air bases, held elections Oct. 10 that resulted in five parties winning seats in a new legislature designed to devolve power from the president to the prime minister.

The vote failed to produce a clear winner in a country where tensions still run high after more

than 400 people were killed in June during clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.

After weeks of wrangling, three parties agreed on Nov. 30 to form a coalition in an attempt to throw off 20 years of failed authoritarian rule that has twice resulted in the overthrow of a president, most recently in April.

But only two days later, the coalition split when it failed to elect a new speaker. Omurbek Tekebayev, architect of the parliamentary reforms, fell three votes short of the majority required to become speaker.

According to Kyrgyzstan's constitution, three failed attempts would trigger a rerun of elections.

North and South

Analysts said Babanov would have a better chance than others of finding a compromise because his Respublika party has members from both the north and south of a country split by political and clan rivalries and divided by a snowcapped mountain range.

"Respublika has a foot in both camps: north and south," said political analyst Mars Sariyev. "Babanov himself is from the north, so he wouldn't want the coalition to be dominated by southern clans."

In Thursday's vote for speaker, Tekebayev — the only candidate — won only 58 of the 61 votes needed for a majority in the 120-seat legislature. Sources told Reuters that most of those who broke from the coalition were Respublika members.

The failed coalition comprised Respublika, the Social-Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan and Ata Meken, the party led by Tekebayev.

Ata Zhurt, the southern-dominated party that scored highest in the October election, is opposed to the parliamentary form of government and was excluded from the coalition.

Ar-Namys, a pro-Russian party that finished third in elections, declined to join.

Under the new model of government, backed by the United States but previously criticized by the Kremlin, the parliament will be the country's main decision-making body and the prime minister will assume more power than the president.

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