



Freedom in the World: 2007

↓ Kyrgyzstan

Population: 5,200,000

Capital: Bishkek

Political Rights: 5

Civil Liberties: 4

Status: Partly Free

Trend Arrow: Kyrgyzstan received a downward trend arrow due to a decline in religious freedom, including a number of violent incidents involving alleged religious extremists that took place in the country's south.

Ten-Year Ratings Timeline For Year Under Review (Political Rights, Civil Liberties, Status)

Year Under Review	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Rating	4,4,PF	5,5,PF	5,5,PF	6,5,NF	6,5,NF	6,5,NF	6,5,NF	6,5,NF	5,4,PF	5,4,PF

Overview:

Although Kyrgyzstan avoided serious political upheaval in 2006 after the unrest that toppled President Askar Akayev in 2005, stability remained elusive amid signs of recrudescing authoritarianism and a standoff between President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and an increasingly energized opposition. The late-December passage of a new constitution that extends presidential powers crushed hopes for constructive constitutional reform. While political change in 2005 brought improvements in media and civil society freedoms, the following year featured disturbing signs of a retreat on media freedoms and continued interpenetration between government and organized crime. On the international front, Kyrgyzstan continued to balance its relations with Russia and the United States. Relations with Uzbekistan warmed from the chill of 2005 amid indications of increased counterterrorism cooperation between the two countries, to the detriment of civil rights and religious freedom inside Kyrgyzstan.

Populated by nomadic herders and ruled by tribal leaders for centuries, Kyrgyzstan was conquered by Russia in the mid-1800s and incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1924. The country declared independence in August 1991. After Askar Akayev, a respected physicist, was elected president in the first direct presidential vote two months later, he introduced multiparty elections and pursued economic reforms. In the 1995 parliamentary elections, no single party won a clear majority, with a mix of government officials, intellectuals, and clan leaders capturing most of the seats in the legislature. Later that year, Akayev was reelected president in early

elections, with more than 70 percent of the vote. In a February 1996 referendum, 94 percent of voters endorsed constitutional amendments that substantially increased the powers of the presidency.

Opposition parties, including the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan, El Bei-Bechora, and Ar-Namys, were barred from competing in the February 2000 parliamentary elections. The rulings, based on minor technicalities, were widely regarded as politically motivated. Six candidates contested the October 2000 presidential poll, which the heavily favored incumbent won with nearly 75 percent of the vote. Ar-Namys chairman Feliks Kulov, who was widely regarded as Akayev's main challenger, was denied registration as a candidate for refusing to take a mandatory Kyrgyz language exam, a move that he charged violated election laws and the constitution (Kulov's native language was Russian). International election observers noted serious irregularities in both the presidential and parliamentary polls, such as biased state media coverage, violations in vote tabulations, and the exclusion of candidates for political purposes.

Years of simmering frustrations in the economically depressed and politically marginalized south culminated in an unprecedented series of public protests in 2002. The demonstrations were sparked by the January arrest of parliament member Azimbek Beknazarov on abuse-of-power charges; critics maintained that he had been detained because of his public criticism of a controversial 1999 border agreement ceding land to China. In the first outbreak of deadly political violence since Kyrgyzstan's independence, several protesters were killed and more than a dozen were wounded in March when police fired into a crowd in the village of Aksy. In an apparent effort to quell the protests, the authorities released Beknazarov from prison the following day. However, in May, he was convicted of abuse of office, given a one-year suspended sentence, and stripped of his seat in parliament.

Thousands of Beknazarov supporters continued to hold rallies, demanding that the charges against him be dismissed and that those responsible for the killings in Aksy be punished. The crisis eased somewhat after an appeals court annulled Beknazarov's sentence in June 2002, allowing him to retain his seat in the legislature. Four former regional prosecutors and police officials were sentenced to prison in December in connection with the Aksy shootings, although critics charged that senior officials who had authorized the use of force had not been brought to justice. The government subsequently made conciliatory gestures toward the southern regions of the country by designating the city of Osh the "southern capital" and awarding it special budgetary privileges.

Opposition parties established several political blocs and coalitions in 2004 in an attempt to improve their chances of successfully challenging progovernment candidates in the following year's parliamentary and presidential polls. With Kulov incarcerated at the time and ineligible for parole until November 2005—and recent electoral code amendments denying people with a criminal record the right to contest elections—former prime minister Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who announced his candidacy for president in June, received the backing of his supporters in a number of opposition parties. Meanwhile, growing discord in parliament was evident throughout 2004, as a scandal over listening devices discovered in the offices of several opposition deputies erupted early in the year, and Prime Minister Nikolai Tanayev, who had the declared support of the president, narrowly survived a no-confidence vote prompted by allegations of corruption.

In the February 2005 parliamentary elections, nearly 400 candidates contested the 75 seats in the unicameral legislature, with voter turnout reported at 60 percent. Fewer than half of the constituencies saw outright victories in which a candidate received the required 50 percent of the vote, so the remaining races had to be decided in a second round of voting two weeks later.

According to an OSCE assessment, the first-round poll, “while more competitive than previous elections, fell short of OSCE commitments and other international standards in a number of important areas.” Irregularities that the election observers noted included multiple voting, voter intimidation, inaccurate voter lists, media bias in favor of progovernment candidates, and the presence of unauthorized persons in polling stations.

During the following weeks, thousands of demonstrators took to the streets across the country to protest election irregularities, support defeated candidates, and ultimately call for Akayev’s resignation. On March 24, 2005, Akayev’s 14-year rule was brought to an end in what became known as the Tulip Revolution, as protestors and opposition supporters stormed the presidential headquarters in Bishkek, taking over the seat of government; police generally did not use violence to suppress the demonstrators. Akayev fled abroad and later agreed to formally resign.

After Kulov was released from prison the same day, he took control of the security forces; however, he stepped down after order had been restored several days later. Kulov was subsequently cleared of all charges by the Supreme Court, which made him eligible to contest future presidential elections. The outgoing parliament was dissolved, with the new legislature appointing Bakiyev as acting president and prime minister.

In the July 10 presidential poll, Bakiyev captured 89 percent of the vote, while his closest challenger, Erkin Kyrgyzstan party leader Tursunbay Bakir Uulu, received just 4 percent. Bakiyev’s victory was regarded as largely inevitable after he and Kulov, his most serious potential rival, formed a political alliance in May: Kulov withdrew his candidacy in exchange for a guaranteed position as prime minister if Bakiyev were to become president. In contrast to the earlier parliamentary vote, OSCE observers concluded that the presidential election “marked tangible progress...towards meeting OSCE commitments, as well as other international standards for democratic elections,” though they noted that the “process deteriorated somewhat during the counting of votes.” According to the OSCE mission report, the participation of six candidates offered voters a degree of choice, and basic rights, including freedom of expression and assembly, were generally respected.

The Bakiyev-Kulov “tandem” held throughout 2006 even as an increasingly vocal political opposition to Bakiyev’s presidency developed. In January, former Foreign Minister Roza Otunbayeva became the cochair, with Beknazarov, of the opposition Asaba Party. In February, speaker of parliament Omurbek Tekebayev resigned after calling Bakiyev “a dog”; Tekebayev went on to play a prominent role in opposition politics for the remainder of 2006. In late April, opposition political parties and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) held a peaceful rally in Bishkek with 10,000 to 20,000 demonstrators calling for reforms and measures to fight crime and corruption. The For Reforms movement, an umbrella opposition group that included the Asaba leaders, held a similar rally in May, and in October organized a forum urging constitutional reform, the transformation of state television into public television, the removal of Bakiyev’s relatives from government posts, and other reform-oriented demands.

The parliament established itself as a hotbed of opposition sentiment in 2006. In May, Bakiyev threatened to take “radical measures” against the body if it pursued a direct confrontation with the executive, implying that he would be willing to dissolve the legislature and call new elections. Though friction between the legislative and executive branches continued throughout 2006, neither side took any truly radical measures.

Constitutional reform, which had been an early promise of Kyrgyzstan’s new leaders after the fall of Akayev, stalled in 2006. In March, Bakiyev created a task force, headed by

Beknazarov, to draft a new constitution. Prime Minister Kulov sent the task force his own draft constitution in June. Later the same month, Beknazarov announced that the task force had failed to arrive at a consensus and had prepared three draft constitutions, envisaging presidential, parliamentary, and presidential-parliamentary forms of government. The task force held meetings across the country and then, in July, submitted its drafts to the president and prime minister; all three versions called for a 75-member parliament with 50 deputies elected on party slates and 25 in single-mandate constituencies (as opposed to the current system of electing all 75 on single mandates). No action followed, and a key demand of the opposition forum in October was that Bakiyev present a draft constitution to parliament within 10 days.

In early November opposition groups held a rally in Bishkek calling for constitutional reform to expand parliament's powers. Shortly after the rally, Bakiyev reached an apparent compromise on a new constitution with lawmakers, who passed the new basic law on November 8. On November 10, Bakiyev signed the new constitution into law. It would curtail the president's powers and strengthen the authority of parliament, although Article 96 of the new constitution allowed for the current president to retain the powers vested in him under the old constitution until his term expires in 2010. On December 30, however, pro-government legislators passed amendments to the constitution that broadened presidential powers until the holding of new parliamentary elections, thus undermining the original intent of the constitutional reform process.

Relations with Uzbekistan, which had soured in 2005 after Kyrgyzstan allowed the airlift of 439 Uzbek political refugees to a third country, improved considerably in 2006. Unfortunately, this came at the cost of an apparent retreat on civil rights within Kyrgyzstan. In August, the European Union, OSCE, and United Nations condemned Kyrgyzstan's refoulement of five Uzbek refugees. The Uzbeks had fled to Kyrgyzstan after their government crushed a small uprising in the city of Andijon in May 2005, reportedly killing hundreds of unarmed civilians in the process. Also in August 2006, Kyrgyz and Uzbek security forces carried out a joint operation in the Kyrgyz city of Kara-Suu in which a prominent Muslim imam was shot to death. The Kyrgyz-Uzbek rapprochement culminated in an October meeting between Bakiyev and Uzbek President Islam Karimov. An official Uzbek news report stressed that the two presidents "share the same view on the issue of the need for combining efforts...in the fight against international terrorism and religious extremist movements." Uzbek authorities routinely used charges of terrorism or religious extremism to suppress domestic dissent.

As in past years, Kyrgyzstan balanced its strategic and economic relations with Russia and the United States in 2006. In October 2005, Washington had secured an agreement to allow the U.S. military's continued presence at the Manas air base. In July 2006, Kyrgyz and U.S. negotiators hammered out a new deal assuring Kyrgyzstan \$150 million in total compensation for the Manas air base, a significant increase from previous annual lease payments of less than \$3 million. Kyrgyz-U.S. relations were marred, however, by the tit-for-tat expulsions of two U.S. diplomats from Kyrgyzstan in July and two Kyrgyz diplomats from the United States in August. Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan maintained warm relations with Russia, which made contradictory moves on its own air base in Kant, Kyrgyzstan, vowing in February to increase troop strength at the base but saying in October that no expansion was in the offing. One indication of closer Kyrgyz-Russian cooperation came in May, when Busurmankul Tabaldiyev, the newly appointed head of Kyrgyzstan's National Security Service, said that future hires would receive training exclusively at Russian intelligence training facilities.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Kyrgyzstan is not an electoral democracy. International election observers described the 2000 parliamentary and presidential elections and 2005 parliamentary elections as neither free nor competitive. However, the 2005 presidential elections, which followed the March popular uprising that toppled the government of President Askar Akayev, were praised for making substantial progress. The constitution has traditionally codified strong presidential rule and a weak parliament. Constitutional reforms enacted in 2006 failed to alter this basic configuration as a result of constitutional amendments passed by pro-government legislators in late December that extended broad presidential powers until the holding of new parliamentary elections.

Constitutional amendments adopted in a February 2003 referendum replaced the previous bicameral legislature (consisting of a 45-member upper house and 60-seat lower house) with a unicameral body with 75 deputies, effective following the 2005 parliamentary poll. Other amendments adopted in the referendum further strengthened the authority of the president at the expense of parliament, abolished party-list voting in parliamentary elections in favor of the single-mandate constituency system (which could further weaken political parties), and granted immunity to former presidents and their families. Both president and parliament serve five-year terms. Proposed constitutional reforms could change this, but progress has thus far been slow. Following the March 2005 collapse of the Akayev government, the parliament began to assert its independence to a greater degree, including in the handling of the president's cabinet nominees, many of whom the legislature rejected.

Most political parties continue to be weak, poorly organized, and centered on a specific leading figure.

Corruption is common throughout Kyrgyz society, and bribes are frequently required to obtain lucrative government positions. As part of the country's anticorruption campaign, the parliament in 2004 adopted a law on income declarations for high-level officials. An anticorruption drive espoused by President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2005 was directed largely against members and associates of Akayev's family. Criminal cases against those figures moved slowly in 2006. Meanwhile, the opposition leveled charges of nepotism and corruption against Bakiyev and members of his family, particularly his son, Maksim. Kyrgyzstan was ranked 142 out of 163 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index.

During Akayev's presidency, the government restricted freedom of the press. The media became more open and tolerant of diverse points of view following the March 2005 popular uprising and subsequent change in regime. But signs of increasing government pressure on the media in late 2005 were reinforced in 2006. In December 2005, the independent television station Piramida withstood a takeover attempt that the station's journalists said was masterminded by Maksim Bakiyev. Masked men attacked the station's broadcast facilities in September 2006, damaging \$200,000 worth of equipment. The NGO coalition For Democracy and Civil Society noted that the attack came after the station had been unable to broadcast for 40 days as a result of "sabotage by state agencies." Separately, in January 2006, Bishkek city prosecutor Uchkun Kerimov had cautioned journalists not to publish slanderous materials about President Bakiyev. Late the same month, journalists at the state-run Kyrgyz-language newspaper Kyrgyz Tuusu protested the dismissal of their editor in chief, Bakyt Orunbekov, allegedly for publishing articles critical of Prime Minister Feliks Kulov.

The government generally respects freedom of religion in this predominantly Muslim country. To obtain legal status, all religious organizations must register with the Ministry of Justice, a process that is often cumbersome. The government monitors and restricts Islamic groups that it regards as extremist and a threat to national security, particularly Hizb ut-Tahrir, an international movement calling for the creation of an Islamic caliphate spanning the Muslim world. A number of violent incidents involving alleged religious extremists took place in the country's south in the second half of 2006—including the killing of five alleged members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan militant group in Jalalabad in July and the shooting of a prominent imam in Osh in August—amid signs of increasing security cooperation between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, underscoring the danger of destabilization in the region. In particular, there were reports that Uzbek security forces were responsible for the killing of imam Muhammadrafiq Kamalov (also known as Rafiq Qori Kamoluddin) in Osh on August 6 during the course of a Kyrgyz-Uzbek joint security operation.

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

Freedom of assembly was respected in 2006, with a number of large-scale opposition demonstrations taking place throughout the year, most without direct interference from the authorities or police. In one instance, however, when the opposition For Reforms movement announced a demonstration in Bishkek on May 27, Defense Minister Ismail Isakov subsequently said a military parade would be held at the same time and place. Despite Isakov's remarks, the opposition rally went ahead as scheduled.

Freedom of association is generally respected, although the harassment and intimidation of NGOs appeared to be on the upswing in 2006 after a short reprieve in the period following Akayev's ouster. In January, Justice Minister Marat Kayipov said that he had ordered his ministry to investigate NGOs that receive foreign funding as a possible threat to national security, although he later backtracked on the statement. Edil Baisalov, head of For Democracy and Civil Society, suffered a head injury in an attack by unidentified assailants in April. The Kyrgyz government expelled two U.S. diplomats in July for allegedly improper contact with NGOs, prompting a group of leading NGO representatives to charge that the government was conducting a campaign to present the groups as a "fifth column."

The law provides for the formation of trade unions, and unions generally are able to conduct their activities without obstruction. Although the right to strike is not specifically codified in law, it is not prohibited. The Federation of Trade Unions is the only union umbrella organization in the country, but unions are not required to join it.

Despite various legislative reforms in the court system, the judiciary is not independent and remains dominated by the executive branch. Corruption among judges, who are underpaid, is reportedly widespread. Defendants' rights, including the presumption of innocence until proven guilty, are not always respected. Police at times use violence against suspects during arrest and interrogation, and to extract confessions.

After the fall of the Akayev regime, with which some criminal elements had developed strong connections over the years, various crime groups struggled to assert greater control and influence within the law enforcement system, as well as in the political sphere. This led to a number of violent incidents, including the murder of parliament member Tynychbek Akmatbayev during a visit to a prison in October 2005. He went to the facility to help calm

inmate riots over poor conditions, but was apparently caught up in a gangland dispute between his brother, reputed mob boss Ryspek Akmatbayev, and an inmate at the prison. In 2006, Ryspek ran in a parliamentary by-election to fill his brother's vacant seat. Before his run, his acquittal on triple murder charges in January raised questions of underworld influence on the judiciary. Akmatbayev's candidacy was subsequently annulled and reinstated. He won the by-election in April, but the Central Election Commission (CEC) refused to register him because of an ongoing murder investigation, and CEC head Tuigunaly Abdraimov claimed that Akmatbayev had threatened him. The issue of Akmatbayev's candidacy, if not that of underworld involvement in Kyrgyz politics, became moot in May when he was gunned down by unknown assailants just outside Bishkek.

In another indication of the fragility of the rule of law in Kyrgyzstan, a representative of the British mining company Oxus Gold, which had been involved in a licensing dispute with the Kyrgyz government, was shot and seriously wounded in Bishkek in July 2006.

Ethnic minority groups, including Uzbeks, Russians, and Uighurs, have complained of discrimination in employment and housing. Members of the country's sizable ethnic Uzbek minority have been demanding more political and cultural rights, including greater representation in government and more Uzbek language schools. In May 2006, ethnic Uzbeks demonstrated in Jalalabad in favor of official status for the Uzbek language, an issue that arose on several occasions in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2006. In a separate example of ethnic conflict that year, police had to quell violent clashes between ethnic Dungan and Kyrgyz in the village of Iskra in February.

The government of Kyrgyzstan, which abolished the Soviet-era exit-visa system in 1999, generally respects the right of free travel to and from the country. However, certain policies complicate internal migration, including a requirement for citizens to obtain official permits to work and settle in particular areas of the country. Corruption and official incompetence marred efforts in 2006 to introduce new passports for Kyrgyz citizens, a pressing issue for many in a country where several hundred thousand citizens are seeking a better fortune abroad as migrant workers.

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 by law enforcement officials discourage victims of domestic violence and rape from seeking legal help. 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. In response, the criminal code was amended in 2003 to punish trafficking with up to 20 years in prison, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs opened an antitrafficking police unit in 2004. The practice of bride kidnapping persists despite being illegal, and few are prosecuted for the crime. Although women are well represented in the workforce and in institutions of higher learning, declining economic conditions in the country have had a negative impact on women's professional and educational opportunities.