

Regional Overview: Central Asia and the Caucasus¹⁵

December 2019 – 4 January 2020

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Bringing clarity to crisis

Key developments in Central Asia and the Caucasus since 15 December 2019 include opposition protests in Kazakhstan, border disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, election results in Afghanistan, and continued ceasefire violations between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In **Kazakhstan**, demonstrations against government repression took place in the country's biggest cities, Almaty and Nur-Sultan, as well as in smaller cities like Shymkent, Semey, Aktobe and Uralsk. Large groups of people gathered in Almaty and Nur Sultan demanding democratic reforms, increased civil rights, and the release of political prisoners on 16 December, a day that also marks the anniversaries of two deadly demonstrations in 1986 and in 2011 ([Reuters, 16 December 2019](#)). While police reportedly detained dozens of protesters in both cities, the Kazakh president unexpectedly unveiled a series of reforms several days after the mass demonstrations. Drafting a new law, the parliament removed the requirement for approval from the Kazakh authorities to conduct public protests in the country, made it easier to create political parties, and reduced the punishment for hate speech and libel. Though President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev initiated the reforms, he is seen as a faithful successor to former President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has faced vehement criticism from the demonstrators. Nazarbayev was accused of abuse of power and corruption in August 2019, but he continues to exercise significant influence in the country ([RFE/RL, 20 December 2019](#)). The relationship between the two leaders has raised concern about the efficacy of the reforms going forward, but – if properly implemented – the changes have the potential to open up the political arena for the opposition ahead of Kazakhstan's parliamentary elections in 2021 ([The Diplomat, 24 December 2019](#)).

Meanwhile, unrest over border disputes between **Kyrgyzstan** and **Tajikistan** emerged once again last month. On 16 December 2019, a group of residents from the border village Kok-Tash protested against Tajik farmers allegedly constructing a fence towards the border in the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan. The conflict turned violent on 18 December 2019 when six Kyrgyz and three Tajik nationals, including one local councilman and four Kyrgyz border guards, were injured in a confrontation between Kyrgyz and Tajik villagers in Kok-Tash ([RFE/RL, 18 December 2019](#)). Border disputes are a longstanding point of contention in the volatile region that encompasses Batken and Ferghana valley where the boundaries of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan converge. Each country maintains exclaves within the borders of the others, and the lack of official border demarcations causes occasional confrontations between locals. Still, Tajik and Kyrgyz authorities claim to be renewing their efforts to address the issue. Following the unrest in Kok-Tash, Kyrgyz President Sooronbai Jeenbekov announced his readiness to swap territories with Tajikistan, though he also expressed concern over the difficulty of financing the high expenses of demarcation work for both countries ([RT, 26 December 2019](#)).

In **Afghanistan**, a US service member was killed by a roadside bomb planted by the Taliban in the northern province of Kunduz. His death marked the 20th US combat death in Afghanistan in 2019, the deadliest year for US forces in the country since NATO formally ended its combat mission in 2014. The US currently maintains between 12,000 and 13,000 troops in Afghanistan, but is expected to reduce the number of forces to 8,600 in 2020. US President Donald Trump has long advocated for winding down US military engagement abroad, and US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper indicated last month that the number of troops in Afghanistan will be reduced “with or without” a peace agreement with the Taliban ([Al Jazeera, 27 December 2019](#)).

Additionally, on 22 December 2019, Afghanistan’s Independent Election Commission announced the preliminary results of the presidential election following a two-month delay amidst allegations of fraud. Based on these results, President Ashraf Ghani received over 50% of the vote, crossing the threshold necessary to avoid a run-off with a thin margin of fewer than 12,000 ballots. Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah received approximately 40% of the vote. Abdullah and other candidates have rejected the results and have called for a full review. Given Ghani’s narrow victory, the election might still go to a second round as Afghanistan’s Electoral Complaints Commission continues to audit thousands of complaints ([Afghanistan Analysts, 22 December 2019](#)).

Lastly, ceasefire violations in **Azerbaijan** and **Armenia** continued at similar levels to previous weeks from 15 December 2019 to 4 January 2020. Over the course of the three-week period, Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Defence reported 135 armed engagements along the Artsakh-Azerbaijan Line of Contact and 83 armed engagements along the Armenia-Azerbaijan Line of Contact. On the other hand, the disputed Artsakh Republic’s Defence Ministry claimed that Azerbaijan was responsible for more than 300 ceasefire violations on

the Artsakh-Azerbaijan Line of Contact over the same period (Artsakh Republic Ministry of defence, 21 December 2019, 4 January 2020). In a separate development, Armenian sources claimed that on the night of 17 December 2019, Azerbaijani armed forces opened fire towards the direction of civilian targets in Koti village and Ijevan-Noyemberyan highway, in Armenia's Tavush province. No casualties were reported, though Armenian forces responded with retaliatory fire (Asbarez, 18 December 2019). In a separate report, Armenia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs documented 127 armed engagements between Azerbaijan and Armenia that took place in November 2019.



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