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PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN: READING AND INTERPRETING THE RESULTS

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Parliamentary elections in the Republic of Kazakhstan on September 19, 2004 became benchmarks for measuring political development in the democratic and semi-democratic regimes of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Firstly, they opened an elections season in the Central Asian region, as parliamentary and presidential elections have been scheduled to be held in most of the Central Asian republics and in some countries in the CIS within next 20 months. Secondly, they showed changes in the attitudes of the ruling elites and general public towards democratization in general and parliamentary process in particular. Thirdly, Kazakhstan became one of the first countries in the CIS to test a new electronic system of voting that was introduced to curb election frauds. The Kazakhstani government invited observers from several dozens of countries to show its dedication to democratization process. Yet, the elections were sharply criticized by the international community, including the OSCE and some human rights groups, and by the local opposition. They also triggered a new round of discussions on the nature of political transition and democratization in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in general and in Kazakhstan in particular.

1. Background

These were the third parliamentary elections since Kazakhstani independence in 1991 and they were held in the background of rapid economic recovery and impressive economic growth. High international oil prices finally helped the Kazakhstani government to repay its debts and to fill up its coffers with petrodollars for the first time since independence. Although Kazakhstan had been exporting its oil for many years, this sector had low returns in the past. The main problem was in the difficult geological structure of the oil fields and long distances to the major consumer markets. This undermined the profitability of the exploitation and export of the carbonate resources in the low oil-price market in the mid-1990s. The situation

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changed dramatically with the beginning of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan in 2001, as the world prices for petroleum were diving around US\$30-50 per barrel.

According to the national statistical agency, the Kazakhstan's real GDP growth in 2003 rocketed to 9.2 percent – one of the highest rates among the CIS countries. The oil and gas sectors became the locomotives of the Kazakhstani economy in 2003, as the Kazakhstan produced 51.28 million tons of oil and gas condensate, nearly 8 percent up from the previous year, and 13.88 billion cubic meters of gas, or about 20 percent up from the previous year. The country exported about 44.339 million tones of oil that is 13 percent more than in the previous year.

For third year in the row strong economic growth and rising oil export allowed the Kazakhstani government to raise pensions, average salaries and significant increase in spending for medial services. In fact in March 2003 Astana declared that it will put special program focused on improving conditions in the Kazakhstani *auls* (villages), especially in remote provinces and areas affected by the ecological problems, such as disappearance of the Aral Sea.

The living standards of the population was improving, as the average monthly salaries increased to about 28,000 Tenge (around US\$198) or about 8.3 percent increase from 2002. This increase was not spread evenly. Some groups of the society benefited handsomely, while about 25 percent of people especially in the southwestern provinces and regions around the Caspian Sea continued live below poverty line. High unemployment is still a serious issue in some provinces of Kazakhstan, as registered unemployment remained at about 9.5 percent or between 670,000-710,000 people. The highly publicized campaign against government officials, who frequently channeled pensions and welfare payments to private businesses, allowed to pay pensions in time; huge improvement comparatively to the 1990s, when people often waited for months for their pensions, salaries and social welfare payments. There also was a clear sign if improvement in health and social welfare systems, as in 2003 Kazakhstan moved from the 79th place to 76th out of 175 in the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index (HDI).

Yet, international experts and representatives of the expatriate business community claimed that the corruption and lack of transparency remains an important issue. In 2003 the Transparency International placed Kazakhstan on the 100 place (out of 133) in its annual corruption perception index, down from 88 place (out of 102) in 2002. The Almaty based anti-corruption center Transparency Kazakhstan specifically cited lack of transparency in many business deals and business activities, especially in oil related and export areas. The conservative Heritage Foundation went even further as it downgraded Kazakhstan from the 130th in 2002 to 131st place (status - mostly unfree) in 2003 in its Index of Economic Freedom. The international experts worried that in Kazakhstan, like in may oil rich countries in the past, the excessive reliance on oil revenue and increasing consumption of the national wealth by small group of the national elite, may lead to recession in all other sectors of the national economy (the so-called Dutch disease). This might not only harm sustainable development of the country in future but lead to the social polarization and social conflicts.

Despite Kazakhstan's achievements in the economic and social areas, the international community remained highly critical with the situation with the independent mass media and human rights. Astana was harshly criticized by the international human rights organizations for treatment of independent journalists and mass media. The single case of Sergei Duvanov was dragging for years. He was arrested in 2002 few days before his travel to the U.S. on the



invitation of several human rights organizations, as he was accused of having sex with minor. This was particularly damaging for the country's reputation, as official Washington joined voices of the Reporters Sans Frontieres, Freedom House and others in defense of the journalist. US Secretary of State Colin Powell personally wrote to President Nazarbayev in strong voice that the Duvanov's case is "damaging Kazakhstan's international reputation." Furthermore, Colin Powell asked Nazarbayev to "personally review these cases" and "release them." The pressure was so strong that Astana reviewed the case and released the journalist.

Another important issue also affected public debates during the parliamentary elections year was the issue of the political succession. Although President Nursultan Nazarbayev declared his intention to stay in power and constitutional changes cleared the way for him to do so, his daughter – Dariga Nazarbayeva – entered the political arena, establishing a pro-government political party. This event fueled debates over the future leadership in the country, as some experts considered Dariga Nazarbayeva as potential successor. Two events in other post-Soviet republics also largely contributed to the increasing interest to the topic. In 2003 and again in 2004 President Askar Akayev of neighboring Kyrgyzstan officially announced that he will step down in 2005, as his term in the office will expire and speculations arise that his wife – Mairam Akayeva – might succeed him. In another development in fall 2003 long lasting President Heidar Alyev of Azerbaijan died and his son – Ilham Aliyev – was elected as the president of the republic. This created the first precedent in the post-Soviet republics of family dynasty in power.

The political development in the domestic arena largely contributed to this perception that the ruling elite were preparing the exit strategy. During recent few years all most important political parties were significantly weakened in the country and the process of re-registration of political parties completed in spring 2003 seriously narrowed the opposition political front. The law on political parties required to register prohibitively high number of members - 50,000 people. Several opposition parties could not meet this requirement. With the exile of former prime-minister Akezhan Kazhegeldin and imprisonment of ambitious Zhakeanov there were no viable challengers among the so-called formal opposition in the case of the dynastic change. The challenges from the so-called informal opposition that have roots in the regional patronage network and clan traditions of the past also diminished during the recent years. The ruling elite built a highly effective and centralized state bureaucratic system and further strengthened it by opening doors to all talented youth regardless of their social status and regional identity. So far as the formal opposition remains weak and there is no challenge from the regional elite, the position of the Nazarbayev family and succession scenarios remains secured for many years to come.

2. The elections

More than 300 candidates, including representatives of the most opposition parties, were competing for 77 seats in the *Majilis* -- the national parliament. Twelve political parties contested in the elections. This included the following political parties and blocks:

- pro-presidential *Otan*, led by President Nazarbayev (as the honorary chairman);
- the *Asar*, led by the President's daughter Dariga Nazarbayeva;
- pro-government block *Aist*;



- Democratic Party of Kazakhstan (DPK);
- Rukhaniyat party, led by Altyنشash Dzhaganova, head of the state-controlled Migration and Demography Agency;
- opposition party *Ak Zhol*
- oppositional block of Communists Party of Kazakhstan (CPK) and Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DCK).

The elections for the for the *Majilis* were held according to the Constitution (1995), Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Elections in the Republic of Kazakhstan, which was amended in 2004 in order to introduce more transparent and democratic elections, Law on Political Parties (2002) and other related legislature. According to the Law, the Central Election Commission (CEC) overviewed the nomination of candidates and managed the actual elections and local election commissions overviewed the elections at the local levels.

The national mass media intensively covered the elections, although the opposition leaders complained that the central television favored pro-government candidates. The opposition groups, especially CPK and DCK, often relied on the paid advertising. In an important development the contesting political parties took part in seven debates that were broadcasted by the central television stations Kazakhstan-1 and Khabar. Meanwhile, Kazakhstani print media opened its pages for whole spectrum of opinions, including critical of the government and ruling family.

The electronic voting was used and the voting ballots were open for all independent observers. The Kazakhstani government claimed that the use of these innovations supposedly gave all Kazakhstani citizens equal rights and opportunity to express their preferences.

According to the final report, the *Otan* won 42 of *Mejilis*'s 77 seats; pro-presidential the Agrarian and Civic Party bloc secured 11 seats; the *Asar* party won four seats. The opposition *Ak Zhol* party won two seats and the Democratic Party of Kazakhstan won one seat. 17 seats in the parliament were won by independent candidates. The main opposition block of the CPK and DCK failed to win representation in the *Mejilis*.

3. What lessons can be learned?

Long before and during the elections, many experts, NGOs and international watchdog organizations criticized Kazakhstani government and Kazakhstani leaders for "having unfair advantages." The criticism included accusations of those in power in raising significantly more resources for pre-election campaign than the opposition, in building an overwhelming election machine, and in the massive Soviet-style propaganda in the mass-media. For example, Ihor Ostash, Vice-President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, claimed that "the improved election legislation did not result in a more transparent election."³

In response, many Kazakhstani officials claim that the criticism loses its foundation when election campaigns in Kazakhstan and the USA are compared. One of the candidates in the U.S. elections collected far more resources than the other. With significant resources in

³ <http://usinfo.state.gov/eur/Archive/2004/Sep/20-2369.html>.



hand, this candidate built up one of the most powerful election machines in the history of the country. As for pre-election actions and use of mass media – one candidate abused his access to mass media emphasizing exclusively the positive outcomes of his policies and ignoring completely many negative outcomes of his actions. A scenario closely resembling the Kazakhstani election, does it not?

Every credible comparative political scientist, however, would dismiss even the mere idea of comparing these two hugely different political systems. The most powerful argument would be that the two countries have completely different political traditions, political institutions and simply have different histories of the political development. At the same time, the very same Western liberal scholars and policymakers would portray liberal democracies and democratic institutions of the western societies, especially elections, as the benchmarks of the universal democratic values. These notions were universally imposed in the Central Asian region in spite of the above-mentioned political differences between the two societies throughout the 1990s, i.e. the era of globalization and the Fukuyama's "end of history" (i.e. the victory of the Western liberal values over totalitarian ideas). No government official in Kazakhstan would challenge the values of the liberal democracies and none of them would call for a return to the totalitarian system. At the same time, these officials do not accept the accusation that the elections in Kazakhstan were unfair.

So what makes the two elections different? What are the fair elections in the modern globalized world after all? Is it enough to accept a set of values and to have a set of specific institutions that should be as close to the western model of democracy as possible, as many international organizations and western donors often insist? Or is there a need to create specific conditions in which these institutions would work in a particular country?

Unfortunately, many policy makers often focus on creation of the specific political institutions more than on the creation of the conditions for democratic development and civil society. Paradoxically, the post-Soviet governments have been encouraged by the western partners to continue the Gorbachev's "revolution from above" working on agendas introduced by donor institutions rather than responding to demands of their own people. In turn, this policy often creates post-colonial political dependency among governments in the region and general political apathy among impoverished population.

The missing point of the discourse was and still is the focus on the subjects of the reforms – on the people and their needs. Specific political agendas of the donor institutions and transitional governments ignored the deteriorating social and economic conditions in the Central Asian societies. For example, for a long time they closed their eyes on the great hardship and poverty among the ordinary people, on disappearance of the middle class and skyrocketing unemployment and on many other social issues in Kazakhstan. Ordinary people simply had no stakes in this liberal democratic experiment. Governments remained advocates of foreign agendas, as the western donors encouraged them to achieve a set of institutional changes. Many liberal opposition political parties, supported by the western donors, did a little better during latest elections, as they also postulated the same institutional changes though may be at a greater speed. These parties often still work exclusively in the largest metropolitan areas, seldom venturing to small towns and cities. Practically all political parties in transitional countries have no solid political base in the society, as the middle class, who could have stakes in the reforms, practically disappeared in many transitional countries.



Kazakhstani parliamentary elections would not meet many liberal democratic criteria not because the democratic institutions are absent there, but because conditions and environment for these institutions were not developed properly. But does it mean that there are no changes?

There are changes, but one should not misunderstand them. These changes should not be judged by the number of registered political parties or by the number of opposition leaders elected into the *Majlis*. The changes should be judged by the improving life of ordinary people in the country, who after a decade of “revolution from above” deserve improvement in the living standards. The changes should be also judged by the growth of the middle class in the country, whose property rights should be respected. The citizens in the country should have equal access to the voting ballots though they would have opportunities to make choices. And what is particularly important is that the government and political parties should begin listening to the voices of ordinary people and hunting for their votes. Only these changes would create a suitable environment for democratic political institutions to work properly.