

BULLETIN

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Early Presidential Elections in Kazakhstan

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Incumbent President Nursultan Nazarbayev will almost certainly win the early presidential elections in Kazakhstan set for 3 April. The decision to hold elections instead of the referendum on extending the presidential term to 2020, as announced earlier, is primarily aimed at maintaining a positive image of the country in the West and does not indicate willingness to carry out systemic changes. Simulated democratisation should preserve the status quo, strengthen the legitimacy of the authorities and postpone the problem of succession.

Presidential elections in independent Kazakhstan were held in 1991, 1999 and 2005, but none of them were evaluated by the OSCE as “free.” President Nursultan Nazarbayev has led the country since his appointment by the Supreme Council of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic in 1990 (previously, in 1989–1990, he was the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan). Under the Constitution he has acquired a special status of the First President of the Republic, who can stand for an unlimited number of terms. In addition, all members of his family enjoy lifelong immunity.

In December 2010 in the provincial city of Oskemen a group of citizens, perhaps inspired by the authorities, requested a referendum to extend Nazarbayev's term until 2020. The following month, over 5 million signatures (out of 9 million citizens with active suffrage) were collected. The idea of holding a referendum was criticised by the EU, the OSCE and the U.S., and met a negative opinion of the Constitutional Council of Kazakhstan. Throughout January the president remained silent, and it was not until his 31 January speech that he reacted critically to the project, announcing the shortening of his term of office (due to expire in December 2012). Soon thereafter, early presidential elections were called for 3 April.

The Electoral Process. Only four candidates out of the total of 22 proposed will participate in the elections. The selection criteria, particularly the exam assessing the Kazakh language proficiency among the candidates, were vague and left room for manipulation. The Central Election Commission (CEC) routinely rejected almost all the complaints and protests, with the campaign far from content-related. The incumbent president and his competitors were given disproportionate presence in the media and most of the articles were self-censored. Under the circumstances, the majority of opposition parties called for a boycott of the elections and withdrew their candidates.

President Nazarbayev enjoys a genuine support of the majority and he could count on 50–75% support, if the elections were fair. This is due to the undisputed success of Kazakhstan during the last 20 years, especially noticeable in comparison with other Central Asian countries. An exceptional achievement, popularly linked with the president, was ensuring internal peace after 1991 in a society highly diversified in ethnic and religious terms. Nazarbayev effectively plays an integrating role of the “father of the nation.” The current signs of social discontent in Kazakhstan do not concern the political system, but higher food prices and rising unemployment. It is doubtful, however, that the opposition can capitalise on this potential, as it has no recognisable candidates or a credible program.

Kazakhstan is characterised by strong state control over the media and political conformism throughout society. The autocratic authorities use little violence, fighting the opposition through marginalising it in the media and through financial pressures rather than severe repression, such as in neighbouring Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan. In the course of the campaign a few street demonstrations have been noted (mostly under the banner of an election boycott), but the police predominantly

do not interfere, and if protests were to break out after the elections, they will most likely be weak and fade away quickly.

There is little doubt that Nazarbayev will win the election with support above 90%. Theoretically, low voter turnout might be a potential sign of opposition's popularity, but it is doubtful whether the CEC will present reliable data here. So far, turnout in presidential elections has reached 90% and was seen, as in Soviet times, as a sign of acceptance for the ruling system. An exception was the election held in 2005, when according to official figures 77% of voters went to the polls.

The Reasons for Holding Early Elections. The most likely reason for dropping referendum plans in favour of the elections is the need to preserve a favourable image of Kazakhstan in the West. Another reason might have been the ongoing protests in Tunisia and Egypt, both belonging to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, which Kazakhstan chairs in 2011. It is likely that in response to mounting aversion to dictators in the Arab countries Nazarbayev has decided to maintain a facade of democracy.

It is also possible that an incentive for holding the election was rooted in the need to demonstrate the sustainability of the authorities in Kazakhstan comparing to instability in the region. In 2010 President Bakiyev was overthrown in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, and the Provisional Government that took over faced problems with maintaining control over the country. Clashes with armed groups of Islamic fundamentalists were recorded in Tajikistan. Under the circumstances Nazarbayev may have decided to demonstrate his strength and popular support. A similar situation was recorded in 2005, when the "Tulip Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan broke out, followed by unrest in the Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan. President Nazarbayev then decided to hold early elections in December 2005, at the same time accepting some minor concessions (OSCE observers estimated that the campaign had been fairer than in 1999).

The elections held on 3 April will not undermine presidential powers while providing Nazarbayev with a semblance of democratic legitimacy. The effortless collection of 5 million signatures in support of the referendum confirmed the authorities' effective control over the country. At the same time, the decision of the Constitutional Council (totally dependent on Nazarbayev) has created a façade of political pluralism and a diversity of opinions. Such games, played for the benefit of foreign states, have been conducted on several occasions, to mention only June 2010, when the president refused to accept the title of the "leader of the nation" proposed by Parliament.

The decision to hold the elections confirms that the aging president is trying to hold on to power for as long as possible. He is thus postponing the moment of succession, which would provoke a struggle for power in the absence of a successor and clearly defined transition mechanisms. Consequently, the election will maintain the current level of stability among the authorities.

International Significance. The elections will not affect Kazakhstan's relations with Russia and China and will not undermine the country's image in the EU and the U.S. The decision to give up the referendum was positively commented by the European Commission and the Department of State. It is impossible to determine the exact influence of Western countries in Kazakhstan, but the decision to hold the elections might indicate that Kazakhstan is taking the opinion of the EU and the U.S. seriously and is ready to make a series of gestures in their direction. However, it does not really matter if Nazarbayev describes himself as a lifelong sovereign or a re-elected president; his unique position will not change.

While preserving friendly relations with Kazakhstan, it is necessary to criticise the irregularities that are bound to take place during the elections. The EU's support for human rights and the rule of law should focus on the protection and development of free media and NGOs. The positive factors include a low level of repression in Kazakhstan and the growing affluence of society, which fosters social activity, but prospects for a democratisation of the political system in Kazakhstan are bleak. It seems that a realistic goal might be a gradual transformation of Parliament from a single-party (the Nur Otan "party of power") to a multi-party chamber. However, there is a risk that fake opposition—the so-called "opposition of power"—might emerge, as in neighbouring Uzbekistan. It is also unlikely that new leaders might come up in an environment totally dominated by Nazarbayev.