

Election Date Controversy in Kazakhstan

Author: [Alim Bekenov](#)

There's little mystery about who'll be the next Kazak president, but when the election will take place is less clear.

Few people in Kazakhstan doubt that Nursultan Nazarbaev will win the next presidential election, but exactly when the poll should be held is proving considerably more controversial.

According to the constitution, the president serves for seven years, and then elections are held on the first Sunday in December after his term expires.

In Nazarbaev's case, his seven years in office end after December 2005, on January 10 next year. That has led some, including justice minister Zagipa Balieva and the head of the Central Electoral Commission, Onalsyn Jumabekov, to argue that elections should be scheduled for December 2006.

Others insist that the poll must be held this December so that new presidential term can begin within the seven year time frame.

"How we legally justify an additional 11 months for a non-legitimate president is a big question," said parliamentary deputy Erasyl Abylkasymov. "We need to gather at the end of August, have discussions, take a decision and hold elections on December 4 this year."

An election sooner rather than later also appears to be the unofficial government line. At a press conference of Nazarbaev's Otan party, deputy party head Amangeldy Ermegiyayev plumped for a vote this year, "so that there can be no false rumours either in the country and outside it. We should not give people an excuse to say that our president is not legitimate."

It's up to the Majilis, the lower chamber of parliament, to announce the election date no later than the second Sunday in September.

But with no consensus on the issue as autumn approaches, parliament has turned to the Constitutional Council of Kazakhstan for an official interpretation of the sections in the constitution relating to elections. Its decision is expected by mid-July.

"We Majilis deputies could violate the constitution because of the confusion of opinions," said Valery Kotovich at a joint session of parliament, explaining the need to call in constitutional experts.

Local analysts believe that whichever way the constitutional council rules, elections will be held this year, not next. A June 13 report from the independent Institute for Socioeconomic Information and Forecasts and the KazRating polling agency found that 61 per cent of the 800 policy analysts and experts surveyed expect the presidential ballot to happen in December 2005.

"If the date for a presidential election is postponed to 2006, then it's clear this will draw criticism from both the opposition and the international community," said Serik Belgibaev, head of the department for

sociopolitical studies at the Kazakstan Strategic Studies Institute.

On the other hand, Belgibaev predicted that “if elections are held in 2006, they will take place in a more difficult situation, as the opposition will be better prepared. At the moment, it is rather fragmented and can’t be said to have a clear strategy for the upcoming election yet.”

No matter when the election is held, most have few doubts who will win, with 62 per cent of the analysts polled by KazRating expecting a Nazarbaev victory.

Among possible Nazarbaev rivals, only one definite candidate comes from the opposition ranks - Jarmakhan Tuyakbay, leader of the For a Just Kazakstan movement, and a former prosecutor general and Majilis speaker.

On June 15, a newly-formed bloc called the People’s Union of Kazakstan, which consists of the Asar party led by the president’s daughter Dariga Nazarbaeva and the little-known Democratic Party of Kazakstan, announced they would put forward a common candidate. It is still unclear whether they will name Nazarbaev himself, or a nominee of their own which could be Dariga.

A former steel industry worker who rose through the Soviet Communist Party’s ranks, Nazarbaev became the head of Kazakstan in 1989 when it was part of the USSR, and he has ruled independent Kazakstan since 1991.

Nazarbaev was reelected president in 1999, but Kazakstan had by then acquired a new constitution so that his current presidential term officially counts as his first, even though he has been in power for a decade and a half.

The president effectively launched his election campaign when in May last year, when in a televised speech, he confirmed his intention to stand again, saying, “under the constitution and current legislation, I have the right to stand for a new term, and if everything goes well, I will certainly take part in the presidential campaign”.

Over the last few months, Nazarbaev appears to have made good on that promise and has begun unofficial campaigning. In May, he visited the three western provinces of West Kazakstan, Aktyubinsk and Mangystau. In June, he was back on the election trail, going to several cities in the central Karaganda region, the oil-producing Atyrau region on the Caspian Sea, and Semipalatinsk and Ust-Kamenogorsk in east Kazakstan.

Alim Bekenov is the pseudonym of an IWPR correspondent in Astana.

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