

Kazak Leader Hints at Political Change

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President promises multi-party parliament – but not just yet.

Kazakstan appears to be moving towards a more pluralist political system, judging by recent remarks made by President Nursultan Nazarbaev. But local analysts tell IWPR that plans to get more parties into parliament are unlikely to make the country more democratic and are little more than a gesture to its partners in the Organisation for Security and Cooperation, OSCE, which Kazakstan is due to chair in 2010.

Addressing the annual opening of parliament on September 2, President Nazarbaev said the country needed a legal mechanism whereby “parliament is constituted with no fewer than two parties, even if one of them does not break the seven-per cent hurdle”.

In the August 2007 legislative election, all the seats in the Majilis or lower house of parliament were won by Nur Otan, the president’s own party. None of the six other parties that fielded candidates was deemed to have crossed the seven per cent threshold set for representation.

At the time the trend was towards consolidation – in the year leading up to the polls, Nur Otan swallowed up three smaller parties.

The August election was criticised by the international community, at a time when Kazakstan’s bid to chair the OSCE was hanging in the balance. OSCE members pressed for a stronger commitment to reform, and last November they granted the Kazaks the OSCE chair not in 2009, as it had requested, but a year later.

With talk of political reform coming so hard on the heels of last year’s vote, the obvious conclusion might be that the president is considering an early election to install a new two-party legislature. However, he immediately scotched this idea.

“There has recently been more and more talk that some kind of early election to the Majilis [parliament] might be held. The current membership was elected legitimately by the nation and is doing an effective job, so there are neither legal nor political reasons for holding an early election,” he said in his speech to the assembly. “The election will take place at the time provided for in the constitution, in other words in 2012.”

Political analysts interviewed by IWPR see a clear contradiction between calling for political reform but then implying there is no real urgency. They believe Nazarbaev, who has been in power since Soviet times, is not planning to build a democracy any time soon. (See **OSCE Pressure Unlikely to Prompt Kazak Reforms**, RCA No. 534, 28-Feb-08.)

Analyst Oleg Sidorov says the president’s statement is merely a sop to the OSCE.

“The idea of creating a two-party was only to be expected given that we are to chair the OSCE,” he said.

Amirjan Kosanov, deputy chairman of the National Social Democratic Party, which came second in last year’s ballot but failed to break the seven per cent barrier, expressed guarded optimism about Nazarbaev’s statement.

“The fact that the authorities aspire to move away from a one-party parliament is in itself progress; it’s a step forward,” he told IWPR.

But he said the problems seen in last year’s election should serve as a warning, and noted that in his recent speech, Nazarbaev was careful to stress that Nur Otan was fairly elected.

“If the election had been genuine and fair, if they’d adhered to generally-accepted international election standards, Nur Otan would certainly never have got that kind of percentage at the polls,” said Kosanov. The president’s party swept the board with 88 per cent of the vote.

There is some speculation about what exactly the president means by a “second party”. Does he mean only that the seven per cent requirement could be scrapped if the runner-up – one of the existing opposition parties – failed to meet it? Some analysts believe he is hinting at something else – the creation of yet another in the long line of pro-regime parties that have appeared over the last decade-and-a-half.

One way to do this, said Sidorov, would be to carve out a new party from the existing Nur Otan. The accelerated process of mergers that preceded the last ballot saw Nur Otan absorb three other political formations including Asar, a party set up and led by the president’s daughter, Dariga Nazarbaeva. Re-establishing Asar would create an alternative party with a more liberal outlook but without being part of the opposition.

Apart from losing her political party, Nazarbaeva has had other troubles over the past year or so. She divorced her husband Rahat Aliev after he fell from grace; he was given a 20-year jail sentence in absentia this March. The couple also lost many of their considerable business interests in Kazakhstan.

Many analysts have written Nazarbaeva off as a politician – at one time she was tipped to succeed her father as president – but political commentator Eduard Poletaev believes the prospect of a second parliamentary party could offer her a way back.

Poletaev, who is editor-in-chief of the Mir Yevrazii political magazine, also suggests another way in which a new party could be engineered into existence. Nur Otan holds all 98 of the seats in parliament reserved for parties, but under constitutional changes pushed through in summer 2007, another nine seats go automatically to an institution called the Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan. This is a consultative body which works for the president and is supposed to monitor ethnic problems and promote harmony among Kazakhstan’s various communities.

According to Poletaev, “The Assembly of Peoples of Kazakstan could be reformed... that’s your second party.”

However Nazarbaev decides to play it, one thing is clear – is still in charge, directing both the nature and pace of any political change.

His remark that new elections are not in the offing recalls previous occasions where he has floated one idea and then done something else, keeping both his allies and his opponents on their toes. If he were to change tack and go for an early election after all, the opposition would be caught unawares.

“We’ve already seen cases like this where the leadership said everything was going to plan and then all of a sudden something happens for which neither the public nor the opposition parties are prepared,” said Sidorov.

Nazarbaev’s own presidency is a prime example of this. When his current term in office runs out in 2012, he should technically step down – and he has in the past suggested he might do so. But in May 2007, the Kazakstan parliament passed a constitutional amendment to allow him, and him alone, to stand for presidential office as many times as he wants.

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