

## **Kazak Leader Plays the Long Game**

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For President Nazarbaev, the forthcoming general election is more about controlling his own allies than curbing the opposition.

The upcoming election in Kazakstan looks set to run a well-worn path, with allies of the regime taking almost all the seats in parliament and little competition from the opposition.

However, since no election was due till 2009 and President Nursultan Nazarbaev already controls the legislature and other branches of authority, there would seem at first sight to be no good reason for bringing the ballot date forward.

In fact, there would be strong reasons not to hold an election just three months before the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, makes a final decision on whether Kazakstan should chair the grouping in 2009. The OSCE assessment means the ballot will be scrutinised especially closely by international election monitors. An election seen to be unfairly conducted, or even pre-arranged to ensure a particular outcome, is unlikely to boost the country's chances of winning a yes vote.

Seen from that perspective, it might seem illogical to be rushing into an election now. But interviews conducted by IWPR suggest Nazarbaev is playing a longer game, and is taking steps now to keep his options open for the next few years, and keep his allies and prospective successors under control until the next presidential election, due in 2012.

### **NEW SYSTEM SUPPOSED TO OFFER PLURALISM**

The August 18 election was called in June, after parliament requested to be dissolved in the wake of constitutional amendments passed the previous month.

The headline news in these amendments was that Nazarbaev, as Kazakstan's first and to date only president, was awarded the right to seek re-election as many times as he wants. That means he can seek a new term in 2012 and again in future ballots until such time he himself decides it is time to step down.

The reason parliamentarians gave for seeking their own dissolution was to allow the constitutional changes to take effect properly, since they presuppose a new-shape legislature with 107 seats in the lower house or Majilis instead of the current 77. The Majilis seats will now be elected by proportional representation rather than single-seat constituencies as has been the case until now, with the exception of nine members who will be coopted by the Assembly of Peoples of Kazakstan, an "ethnic diversity" organisation close to the president.

In theory, proportional representation has some clear advantages, for instance offering a better chance to those political parties currently unrepresented in the legislature to seek and win seats.

"A transition to a multiparty system is under way," said Petr Svoik, a political observer in Kazakstan. "This process will strengthen the role of parliament and also the struggle among parties to achieve democracy."

Most commentators agree that a pluralist legislature will not happen in this round, partly because few opposition or alternative parties enjoy significant grassroots support.

Another reason is that the same day he dissolved parliament, Nazarbaev also signed off on a law banning the formation of election blocs. In recent months, a number of like-minded parties had formed such blocs in the hope it would boost their appeal. Without that option, parties will find it difficult to campaign on their own.

Parties are not, however, prevented from merging completely into a single entity. One of the most promising is the marriage between the National Social Democratic Party and Nagyz Ak Jol, which Svoik describes as offering a “real challenge”.

However, a new party has to demonstrate that it has at least 50,000 members and a branch in every province of Kazakhstan before it can gain official registration.

According to Tamara Kaleyeva, the director of the Adil Soz free speech group, “Nazarbaev is not giving the opposition parties any time to prepare for the elections and is thereby curtailing their chances. He’s guaranteeing victory for his own party, Nur Otan.”

#### PRESIDENT’S PARTY TO DOMINATE NEW LEGISLATURE

Few would dispute that the election will be a walkover for Nur Otan, the party which the president himself leads and which has seen its membership grow to 900,000 after swallowing up three smaller groups, not the least of which was Asar, the creation of the president’s daughter Dariga Nazarbaeva.

Kaleyeva says the giant party has now attained something like the all-powerful status that the Communist Party enjoyed in Soviet times.

“The new parliament will have a sprinkling of opposition [members] for decency’s sake,” she predicted.

Despite the apparent drift towards a one-party system, Askar Nursha, head of foreign policy studies at the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, believes that eventually, there will be more parties than just Nur Otan on the scene. While he thinks the opposition are too weak to do well in the forthcoming ballot, he believes they will “improve their chances in a year’s time”.

“As well as strengthening Nazarbaev’s Nur Otan, the elections will help other parties come to the fore and thus help create a multiparty government in the long run,” Nursha told IWPR. “Power is shifting from a presidential republic to a parliamentary structure.”

Nursha says President Nazarbaev is genuine about political reform, arguing, “This election is not about getting rid of the opposition. If he wanted to control the opposition, it would be to the president’s advantage to keep the current parliament.”

He commented, "In Kazakhstan, democratisation is done from the top down."

Some analysts disagree, saying the election has effectively been fixed to make Nur Otan, and through it, the legislature, into even stronger instruments of presidential control than they are now.

"Nur Otan's expected victory will be largely an artificial one achieved with the backing of the administration and its resources, and through a variety of manipulations during the vote and the subsequent count," said Andrei Chebotarev, the director of the Alternativa Centre for Contemporary Research.

Yevgeny Zhovtis of the Kazakhstan Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, agreed, saying, "The architect of this regime [Nazarbaev] has arranged an election with a predictable outcome, ruling out any risks."

That outcome, added Zhovtis, will leave "the president in full control of his party and also parliament. Everything depends on the president."

#### ELECTION COULD INFLUENCE OSCE VOTE

The lack of warning given for the August 18 ballot and the near-certainty that one party will dominate are unlikely to score Kazakhstan many points with international election-watchers. The vote comes just as the Kazakh authorities are seeking to impress on the OSCE that they have made significant progress on democratisation.

The indictment of Rahat Aliev, Kazakhstan's ambassador to the OSCE who was in charge of promoting his country's bid, cannot have helped.

Winning the OSCE's rotating chair in 2009 has been a central part of Kazakhstan's attempt to win international credibility and acceptance. Foreign ministers from the grouping were to have taken a decision last November, but they postponed it pending further evidence of improved commitment to democracy.

President Nazarbaev sold his constitutional amendments as a significant step towards political pluralism, but according to Chebotarev, a lot hangs on whether election procedures are anywhere close to OSCE standards. "Given the way elections were conducted from 1995 to 2006 and the criticism made by the OSCE and other international organisations, the authorities are likely to have problems meeting these conditions," he said.

#### NUR OTAN WILL BE SUBSERVIENT TO POLICYMAKERS

After the election, the consensus among analysts is that the new parliament will work with the president to maintain continuity of policymaking and sustained growth, rather than instituting radical changes.

"Policy continuity will be maintained. Kazakhstan has moved beyond the transitional period and has

ambitious goals... A stable approach is required to achieve them," said Anton Morozov, head of political and economic studies at Kazakhstan's Institute for Strategic Studies. "Nur Otan will ensure progress towards these strategic goals and provide continuity."

Nikolai Kuzmin, political editor of the Expert-Kazakhstan journal, said that after the election, most members of parliament would be Nur Otan cardholders. "The [election] result is that the political obstacles to the president's economic policies will be removed," he said.

Chebotarev predicts a process of evolution, not into a fully-fledged multiparty system but rather into a modernised version of the one-party state.

"A party political system is being created along the lines of that which we've seen operating intermittently in Mexico, Sweden and Japan," he said. "One particularly significant pointer is the fact that the May constitutional reforms gave the head of state the right to be involved in political party activity at the same time as exercising his official powers. This led to him being confirmed as formal leader of Nur Otan."

None of that points to an independently strong party, Chebotarev concludes.

"Nur Otan doesn't really have its own strategies or development programmes, nor does it wield the powers or instruments to implement them," he said. "So it will simply continue to function as an organisation whose job is to provide public backing for official policies.... Even if positive changes occur in the economy or the social sector, Nur Otan will have contributed virtually nothing to making them happen."

#### STILL LOOKING FOR AN HEIR

Nur Otan's domination of parliament is likely to make the decision-making process smooth, but it seems that in making these changes, President Nazarbaev is also making calculations about broader political issues – including his own future.

He could opt to stand again in 2012, but by that time he will be 72, and while he is reported to be in good health, he may not want to carry on forever.

To stand down, he would need to ensure there was someone to take over.

In Nursha's view, the constitutional changes passed in May are part of making that happen. "Political reforms are needed. In the present set-up, it wouldn't be feasible to have successors to Nazarbaev," he said.

Nursha predicts that the president will stand for election again, but insists this does not mean he plans to stay in the job for life.

"Nazarbaev will govern beyond 2012. The majority of the population support him because of the country's economic growth," he said. "But the fact that the president can stand for election any number of times does not mean he will stay in power indefinitely."

The upcoming parliamentary election and the 2012 ballot are simply paving the way to a more democratic system, he thinks. "It's right that there should be a transitional period, and there is no point in trying to leapfrog it," he said. "Kazakhstan won't become a democracy immediately. It would be dangerous to accelerate the transition since that could be a threat to stability."

Morozov, too, described the amendment giving Nazarbaev the right to stand for election as "merely a legal principle".

"It's unclear whether he will use that principle; it seems doubtful that he will," he added.

Other analysts were less optimistic that Nazarbaev would go of his own volition. "I think he will rule as long as his health allows it," said Kaleyeva. "If he is basically healthy... he won't resign voluntarily."

Much will depend on whether a likely candidate emerges in the interim - one that is what journalist Sergei Duvanov calls "a dependable successor".

Such a figure would need to be able to maintain unity and paper over the divisions between rival elite groups, and most importantly would not be in a position to persecute Nazarbaev after he left office. None of Central Asia's post-Soviet leaders has retired after voluntarily ceding power to a successor.

"It's quite possible that President Nazarbaev is strengthening his grip on the situation in the country and on the political elite in particular in order to prevent instability occurring while he is in power and afterwards, should he resign or die," said Chebotarev. "In any case, he's interested in obtaining security guarantees for his family members."

Zhovtis said the president would consider his personal safety as well as the general political situation when he came to a final decision. "Everything will depend on what assessment he makes of the country from the point of view of his own interests. If there's a real concern, he'll get himself re-elected," he said.

Nazarbaev may seek to leave the decision as late as possible, since anointing a successor too soon could weaken his own position. It may also be the case that he does not have anyone in mind.

Kaleyeva noted that a succession of politicians seen as possible heirs to Nazarbaev in the past have come to a sticky end - forced to flee the country, imprisoned or simply cast out of political life. "He hasn't allowed himself to be surrounded by heirs," she concluded.

Even Dariga Nazarbaeva, the president's daughter, whose name has been floated more than once in the past, is no longer seen as a contender. The Asar party which appeared to be conceived as a vehicle to promote her has now disappeared, incorporated into Nur Otan, and she has lost the post of deputy chair of the super-party which she got as part of the merger deal.

Nazarbaeva's chances will also have been dealt a blow by the charges brought against her husband Rahat Aliev, a prominent businessman. In May, Aliev was indicted for the alleged abduction and beating of two

bankers in Kazakhstan. However, he was out of the country, serving in Vienna as Kazakhstan's ambassador to Austria and the OSCE.

Aliev denies the charges, saying they were brought after he told Nazarbaev in a private conversation that he too would like to be president one day. He has declined to return home and embarrassingly for the Kazakh authorities, the Austrians are refusing to extradite him.

Political experts interviewed by IWPR were sharply divided on whether there was any connection between the snap election and the Aliev affair, with Kuzmin calling it "coincidence" and while Kaleyeva saying the scandal was "not the prime mover" for the forthcoming election.

Morozov, on the other hand, said, "There is a link between the constitutional amendments and Rahat Aliev. Aliev had ambitions to be the next president."

According to Chebotarev, one immediate consequence is that individuals and groups seen as close to Aliev will now find themselves in the political wilderness. Although she has now divorced Aliev, the president's daughter has still been dropped as a Nur Otan parliamentary candidate as well as from the party's senior leadership.

Chebotarev also made the broader point that this kind of incident "demonstrates that the extent of the influence and control that the president and his entourage wield in the country generally and within the system of power have suffered some significant mishaps".

This loss of total control has "upset the balance [of power] in relationships among the leading groups within the ruling elite."

At the same time, he said, "the president is making intensified efforts to balance out the various forces that make up the political elite. By dividing and evening out the different groups, he gains control over them to an extent, so they don't currently represent any threat."

## PLANNING FOR EVERY EVENTUALITY

Leaving the nomination of an heir until close to 2012 could intensify the infighting between these groups – which bring together powerful politicians with influential businessmen. So Nazarbaev has left himself the option of actually standing again if no single candidate emerges.

"The elite is not monolithic; the groupings within it fight each other," said Zhovtis. "The president does not fear any one person in particular... but the system is unstable and there is growing conflict within it."

Nazarbaev's party may provide him with a useful way of corralling these rival interests. As Kuzmin put it, "The Kazakhstan elite is currently being mixed together within Nur Otan."

Seen from the vantage point of 2012, then, the constitutional changes and election of 2007 may be seen in retrospect as part of a grand strategy to ensure President Nazarbaev is in a position to make any number

of decisions about the future. Right now, he may not have decided what that future is, or how he fits into it, but it is clear he does not want to cut off any avenues yet.

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