

Kazak Opposition Says Election Campaign Unfair

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The government has promised the presidential poll will be fair and transparent, but Nursultan Nazarbaev's opponents are not convinced.

Kazak opposition figures and some international observers say an election campaign marred by intimidation and dirty tricks means the winner of the December 4 presidential poll has already been decided.

Though there are five presidential hopefuls, the race has so far been dominated by President Nursultan Nazarbaev whose election posters and billboards paper the countryside, leading to complaints from other candidates.

Concerns have also been raised by Nazarbaev's main rival, Jarmakhan Tuyakbay, over intimidation of his supporters, particularly those in rural areas.

Zoya Kojanova, the deputy head of Tuyakbay's campaign, showed IWPR a folder filled with complaints including allegations that a district police officer confiscated and destroyed opposition newspapers.

Other allegations come from one woman who writes that the village head forbade her from campaigning, and another who describes a talk with a representative from the pro-presidential Otan party during which she was warned to stop campaigning and think about the fate of her four children.

"Nazarbaev will get as many votes as he needs," the Otan representative allegedly said.

IWPR spoke to Igor Shinkarik, an observer from the Commonwealth of Independent States Monitoring Organisation, CIS-EMO, two hours before he went home to Russia. He was ordered out of Kazakhstan after the government revoked the group's accreditation.

CIS-EMO, a Russian non-government group separate from the official CIS monitors, had produced a critical interim report on the elections, and Shinkarik echoed the condemnation from the Tuyakbay camp.

"I can list the numbers of constituencies which two weeks before the start of elections are absolutely unprepared to conduct voting," said Shinkarik. "While one can say violations of electoral law are occurring everywhere in the cities, in rural areas criminal laws are being broken in the treatment of campaigners."

Nazarbaev is not officially campaigning, saying the achievements of the country under his long leadership speak for themselves.

However, he has drafted in his daughter Dariga Nazarbaeva, leader of the Asar party, as well as a coalition of pro-presidential parties to help drum up support.

Police sirens and closed roads heralded Dariga Nazarbaeva's arrival in the Pavlodar region of northeastern Kazakhstan where sympathetic factory workers and students were given time off to meet with her. After the visit, she told a local television station she expected her father to win with 70 per cent of the votes, and said she is working to ensure a high turnout.

Pavlodar, with a population of 450,000, has been a problematic region for the regime in recent years. The opposition took 30 per cent of the vote there in the 2002 and 2004 parliamentary polls.

Though he is not visible in person, the Nazarbaev campaign is apparent everywhere in Pavlodar. His campaign team have organised numerous concerts, forums and conferences both in the city and the region during which his achievements are praised.

Dozens of billboards are scattered around the city along with around 80 other advertisements for the president. When Sholpan Akkazina from the National Network of Independent Observers queried the posters, the Central Election Commission, CEC, told her that only five contained campaign materials for Nazarbaev. The rest, according to the CEC's Sansyzbay Akimbekov, were put up in September when Nazarbaev visited Pavlodar.

Igor Shinkarik thinks the CEC is missing the point and sees the barrage of pro-Nazarbaev posters as yet another electoral violation by the authorities.

"It is not important how long it was here before the beginning of the election campaign," he said. "On the first day of campaigning, these billboards should either have been removed, or information should have been put on them with information on who ordered them and on payment from the electoral fund by the presidential candidate."

Tuyakbay's representatives, meanwhile, say they have been refused even one billboard with various excuses given.

Tuyakbay, the head of the Coalition for Democratic Forces for a Just Kazakhstan and a former parliamentary speaker, is seen as Nazarbaev's main opponent. He resigned from parliament in late 2004, switching his support to the opposition. The coalition - officially registered in August - includes the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, the Pokolenie Pensioners' Movement, the Alga Party and the Naghyz Ak Zhol Party and is now the leading opposition group.

However, in Pavlodar at least, many residents believe the real candidate should be governor Galymjan Zhakiyanov, who was Pavlodar's regional governor before he broke with the government.

It was Zhakiyanov's suggestion to put forward Tuyakbay as a single candidate from the opposition as he is serving a seven-year jail sentence for abuse of office, after a controversial trial that sparked protests at police and court buildings.

Analysts say Pavlodar has been problematic for the Nazarbaev regime ever since, with political candidates positioning themselves as friends or allies of Zhakiyanov, whose name is raised frequently in the battle for voters.

“We say that Galymjan and Jarmakhan are going to the elections together,” said the head of Tuyakbay’s Pavlodar campaign Gennady Bondarenko. “The vote will show whether Dariga Nazarbaeva, by making these visits to... Pavlodar, was able to change the minds of people who believe in Galymjan Zhakiyanov and Jarmakhan Tuyakbay,”

The other candidates are Alikhan Baimenov, the leader of the Ak Zhol party, which recently split in two with one half joining Tuyakbay and the other following Baimenov; Communist National People’s Party of Kazakhstan member Erasyl Abylkasymov; and independent Mels Eleusizov.

Although all the candidates have their own policy platforms, they bear a striking resemblance to each other and are of little interest to voters. Both Nazarbaev and Tuyakbay, for example, use the colour yellow in their campaign materials.

With little debate on the policy front, the presidential hopefuls instead use rumour and insinuation to score points. The Nazarbaev family are frequent targets, with stories circulating about factories and lavish mansions they are said to own.

For example, Dariga Nazarbaeva is said to own the Pavlodar petrochemicals plant – a claim she denies.

“People will soon say that we’ve bought the Alatau mountains too,” she said.

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