

## **Nazarbaev Granted Lifetime Powers**

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Opponents of President Nazarbaev are accusing him of turning Kazakstan into a feudal state.

The opposition in Kazakstan this week warned that parliament's decision to grant President Nursultan Nazarbaev lifetime powers and privileges represented a major threat to the fledgling democracy.

The lower parliament and the upper senate voted overwhelmingly on Tuesday to enable Nazarbaev to continue to exercise substantial influence over the authorities after he stands down as head of state in six years time.

Fifteen small opposition parties had earlier signed a joint statement urging parliament, which is dominated by pro-government deputies, to scrap its proposed law. There are suggestions that some deputies had little idea of the significance of the legislation, believing that it merely conferred a number of small privileges on the president. Many media executives were none the wiser.

The opposition statement pulled no punches. "If you accept this law... the world will finally be convinced that's we are a feudal country, which will never accept democracy, international rights and civilised norms," it said.

The law - which was first proposed by the Civilian Party, representing powerful industrial interests - is a significant watershed in Kazak politics. In the past, the authorities tried to disguise their efforts to consolidate the president's power. Now, it seems, they are openly starting to build a pyramid of power with the president at the top.

The legislation will enable him to influence future presidents, governments and parliaments and guarantees him membership of key advisory bodies. Critics of Nazarbaev, who has ruled the country with an iron grip for the past decade, say the law effectively means he will be able to run the country for life.

"The first president on leaving his post, will in effect become a khan (local potentate) and will run the country as before without being answerable to anything," the opposition statement said.

Nazarbaev has rather disingenuously attempted distance himself from the legislation, suggesting it has all been the work of parliament. He claimed that he only learnt of the initiative in a Russian newspaper. "I don't think it is particularly helpful for me to adopt such laws now," he said. His opponents found it all rather unconvincing. "Nothing significant at all can happen without the will of the president, said one prominent Kazak intellectual.

The controversial law reflects a growing trend towards authoritarianism in Central Asia. Leaders of all the countries in the area are seeking to extend their mandates. Turkmenistan president, Saparmurat Niyazov, has already been named lifetime leader.

The emergence of the region's power-hungry presidents has its roots in the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The move away from Soviet totalitarianism was accompanied by the strengthening of the role of the legislature in Central Asian republics, with the exception of Turkmenistan. The heads of state permitted this, not because they were true democrats. They felt it was the only way their countries would be accepted by the international community and receive western financial support.

But over time, they realised that they had devolved too much power - and began to diminish the influence of the legislatures. Confrontations between the two reached a peak in the mid-90s. In Kazakhstan, for example, the Supreme Soviet was twice dissolved and declared illegitimate. As a result, heads of state in the region began to concentrate power in their own hands.

At the same time, they also tightened the family-clan structure of power that predominates in the region. In Kazakhstan, a recent poll revealed that the top five politicians in then country were members of Nazarbaev's family.

Some western diplomats believe a clan member is likely to succeed Nazarbaev if and when he eventually stands down. The two front-runners, it seems, are his son-in-law and National Security Committee officer, Rakhat Aliev, or Dariga, his daughter who's in charge of the state television channel, Khabar.

All of which is a fairly depressing prospect for the Kazak opposition. Nazarbaev's consolidation of power seriously threatens their activities. If they continue to criticise the authorities they risk prosecution. They can only avoid self-censorship, it seems, by going underground.

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