

New Party Emerges From Kazak Protest Movement

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Umbrella group serves as channel for range of public concerns.

A new party that has emerged out of grassroots protest groups in Kazakhstan has more chance of building support than many current opposition groups, analysts say. But it faces the same challenges as the more established parties – how to withstand attempts by the authorities to sideline it, and how to avoid internal schisms which could tear it apart.

The party, whose name is yet to be decided, is based on the Kazakhstan-2012 movement, a political vehicle for various protest groups set up during the economic crisis that has hit Kazakhstan over the last year or so. Kazakhstan-2012 announced plans to transform itself into a political party at a congress held in Almaty, the country's main commercial centre, at the end of March.

The mainstream parties in Kazakhstan – pro-regime as well as opposition – have tended to be set up by politicians and organised from the top down. Kazakhstan-2012 is a radical departure from this model – it came together last year as an amalgamation of forces representing a diversity of concerns among working- and lower middle-class people who were hit hard by the economic crisis and felt they were being ignored by government.

They include small-time shareholders left with nothing when construction companies in which they had invested hard-earned savings became insolvent; families on modest incomes who took out home mortgages and are now threatened with repossession; factory workers and market traders who lost their jobs; and farmers.

The group's name refers to the date of the next parliamentary and presidential elections, and its main political slogan is a direct challenge to the administration of President Nursultan Nazarbaev – “Change Your Policies or We Will Change You”.

In an interview for IWPR, one of the leaders of Kazakhstan-2012, Aynur Kurmanov, said becoming a party was the logical next step for the movement, which he argued was always “a transitional stage on the way to creating a more complex political structure”.

Kurmanov said the decision to form a party came out of a realisation that an alternative political force was needed because none of the existing parties truly represented the interests of the people involved in the movement.

He would not be drawn on whether it would take weeks or months to form the party, saying much would depend on the political situation. But he insisted, “The party is going to be set up, there's no doubt about that.”

Most of Kazakhstan's parties are pro-government, but four are in opposition – the Communist Party, Democratic Party Azat, National Social- Democratic party and the still unregistered Alga. Of the seven parties that ran in the last parliamentary election, held in 2007, the president's Nur Otan was the only one deemed to have passed the seven per cent threshold, taking all the seats earmarked for parties in the Majilis or lower house.

Analysts agree that the new party could fill a void on the political scene, since neither pro- nor anti-government parties are perceived to be responsive to ordinary people's concerns.

As Anton Morozov, head of the sociopolitical research department at the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, put it, Nur Otan does not have a real “sparring partner” among the existing opposition groups.

The Kazakhstan-2012 movement could potentially grow into that role, he said.

“First, it will be the only party created from the ground up, from the midst of the people. It's no secret that the creation of parties in Kazakhstan occurs artificially,” he said. “Second, its leadership is not going to be made up of former officials, businessmen, parliamentarians, and other functionaries who previously made their names in the administration. That sets Kazakhstan-2012 apart from other groups in the political arena, to its advantage. Third, one may assume that Kazakhstan-2012's ideological direction means it will occupy the left wing in the political arena, which has thus far remained unfilled.... And socialist ideas as propagated by Kazakhstan-2012's leadership are fairly popular.”

Andrei Chebotarev, director of the Alternative think tank, said social tensions have been growing since autumn 2007, when the effects of global economic crisis first hit Kazakhstan.

“What’s more, this mood is spreading more and more to population groups that have traditionally been loyal to the authorities and removed from politics, including small-scale entrepreneurs, workers at large enterprises, urban dwellers, army reservists, and so on,” he said.

But analysts warn that the strengths that make Kazakhstan-2012 stand out from the crowd could also become weaknesses in a political party.

The diversity of the groups operating under its umbrella could make it difficult to agree on a leader, while the fact that its support base is among low-income groups means its financial resources will be limited. Moreover, the more popular the party becomes, the tougher the pressure it will face from the authorities.

Morozov says there is a fair chance that Kazakhstan-2012 will never get as far as becoming a political party.

“In Kazak politics, there’s a substantial past record of existing parties and public movements becoming fractured, and also of political leaders being bumped off – literally as well as figuratively,” he said.

Chebotarev said that although there had been no official reaction to Kazakhstan-2012’s announcement, the movement was being watched closely by the country’s security services, especially in light of recent developments in Kyrgyzstan, where grassroots protests sparked by economic concerns forced President Kurmanbek Bakiev out of power in early April.

“There’s no doubt that given the turbulent events in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, the authorities don’t have any need for an unpredictable opposition,” he said. “They may therefore exert all sorts of levers of influence on the newly created party and its active membership, ranging from attempts to sow division in their ranks to refusing to grant the party registration on artificially constructed pretexts, as has happened to the Alga People’s Party.”

Chebotarev said a lot would depend on whether the new party would be able to elect a single leader, given that the groups which make up Kazakhstan-2012 have themselves undergone a number of schisms.

“Right now, there are several individuals who are clear leaders. But there have already been cases of differences of opinion among what I would call the ‘popular opposition’, including several individuals who have left the various organisations..... Furthermore, virtually all the opposition parties in the country have gone through splits and divisions at various points, more because of personal disagreements than for reasons of political ideology.”

For the moment, Kurmanov is the main public face of Kazakhstan-2012. He comes with strong working-class credentials, with a background in a defence industry factory and trade unionism, and more recently with grassroots protest groups such as Shanyrak, which represents squatters in a settlement on the fringes of Almaty.

Asked about the risk the party would not be granted official status, Kurmanov said it would not be deterred.

“Of course they won’t register us. That doesn’t scare us – the Bolsheviks weren’t registered, either,” he said, referring to Lenin’s Communist Party which came to power in 1917.

Even without registration, he said, Kazakhstan-2012 would find ways of playing a part in the elections in two years’ time by entering into alliances with other opposition groups.

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