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Political Change in Kazakhstan



Nazarbayev and Tokayev. Photo credit: Tokayev's Twitter Page.

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New President, New Hopes, and Mass Unrest

2019 was a historic year for Kazakhstan as the country inaugurated its second president, marking a major change in the political regime. While many citizens remained hopeful after Kassym Jomart Tokayev's election, others were skeptical, due to the president's connection with Nazarbayev and concerns about whether he would act independently. His political campaign consisted of promises for economic growth and development of small business, as well as focus on a more just system. This included looking at the extreme wealth divide, low wages, a weak healthcare system and supporting the youth. The next two years seemed to go smoothly for Tokayev, especially for his foreign policy that shored up relations with Russia and fostered closer cultural and political ties with China, the predominant power on the Asian continent.

Tokayev faced his major challenge as President in early 2022, in which Kazakhstan saw the strongest protests and looting the country has ever seen, which represented the boiling up of many socio-economic issues and the public's cry for a change. What started off as a peaceful protest soon turned violent, resulting in hundreds of deaths and more outcry ([see Article: Protests in Kazakhstan Rock The Nation](#)). The outcome of this unrest included Nazarbayev stepping down from his

advisory position, a new Prime Minister and the change of Defense Minister. While initially sparked by oil price changes, the unrest marked citizens' discontent with Kazakhstan's political situation. Many questioned if Tokayev was implementing his promises and wondered if any changes were occurring.

2022 Summer Reforms

Certain reforms came after the unrest. Some, like much needed turnover among government bureaucrats, were demanded by the protestors. Others were extensions of Tokayev's campaign promises. Reforms began on June 5, 2022, addressing what seemed like rules in the Constitution that favored a certain group of individuals. A specific example of this change included Nazarbayev and his immediate family being barred from receiving political positions and roles in quasi-government companies. Tokayev also changed the capital city of Nur-Sultan's name back to Astana. This reform is supposed to take away patronage and power away from Nazarbayev and address issues of nepotism and the favoring of specific families in Kazakh politics. This change is also an effort to support Tokayev's promise of dispersion of power by promoting smaller and lower levels of government. In one of his speeches, Tokayev stated, "the era of oligarchic capitalism in Kazakhstan is ending as the country is entering an era of greater social responsibility to its citizens. Our citizens need an efficient and socially responsible business that occupies a leading position in the country's economy."

Further changes that came with constitutional reforms include solidifying the powers of the parliament so that more city and "oblast" (state) representatives have the ability to enforce laws. This fulfilled part of Tokayev's promise of checks and balances as well as potentially helping decrease corruption so that lower-level government leaders hold power. The second change was that the President would only be allowed to elect 10 (as opposed to 15) Senate members, allowing the rest to be elected by the Assembly. Lastly, the President would not be allowed to "appoint the

Chairman of the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court. Out of six members of the constitutional court, three each would be nominated by the National Assembly and the Senate, while only the remaining four would be nominated by the president.” These changes were specifically made to uphold and promote the powers of the parliament.

Other key reforms included:

- simplification of political party registration forms.
- providing for laws to be made by Mazhilis (as opposed to Senate) ensuring the lower house of parliament holds the ability to significantly influence national policy.
- Bi-annual audit reporting review government expenditures.
- Direct election of Akims (village and town representatives).
- New region creation/new district creation to enforce new lower government.
- Presidents can now serve one term, but the length was changed from 5 to 7 years
- Checks and balances through creation of the audit committee, appeal from citizens through the constitutional court, and the President not being allowed to be part of a political party during their term.

The referendum providing for these changes was approved by 77.18% and sparked hope that true progress was being made. However, these reforms have been criticized for being primarily designed to quell public outcry and not actually solving the serious issues facing the country. Following these constitutional reforms, Tokayev announced a snap-election in September, with results coming out in November 2022 favoring his reelection by 81.3%. Once again, the President faced both support and criticism - with some praising his reforms and noted his ability to enact them during his next term. Others noting that the snap election was held 2 years in advance of its regularly scheduled date, giving opposition parties little time to craft an effective campaign against the entrenched President. Tokayev also enacted a rule limiting presidents to just one seven-year

term. However, he was personally exempt from the rule, allowing him to run for a second term, causing many to question his commitment to following through on the rest of his democratization promises. Part of the requirements to be president (that were not changed) also include being at least 40 years-old with a five-year servitude in a public office or party, which allows for those as part of the old-regime to run and prevents many younger candidates from entering the race.

Other criticisms include lack of government accountability for the deaths stemming from the 2022 unrest, as it has been blamed for perpetuating violence and committing human rights abuses. While Tokayev has voiced support for an investigation into these events, critics demand a transparent explanation of government involvement in the protests-turned-bloodbath, especially with regard to allegations of torture and extrajudicial killings. Moreover, former President Nazarbayev's corrupt legacy has not been forgotten, as citizens have also demanded accountability for actions that occurred during his presidency. Some are calling for the seizure of the Nazarbayev family's off-shore assets. While they are barred from politics in Kazakhstan, the Nazarbayev family and those with connections did not face strong punishments for what occurred for the past 30 years. The family accrued a vast fortune on the back of state finances with little oversight or accountability.

Current Situation

It has been 6 months since Tokayev's reforms and re-election, making it hard to pass judgment on the reforms' effectiveness. While many are holding out hope for real progress, they are also skeptical considering Kazakhstan's difficult post-Soviet transition. True change will perhaps be more evident in the next election as with it comes the public's ability to assess new individuals and parties in the presidential campaigns. Moreover, this would also allow for enough time to judge the effectiveness of parliamentary votes and Mazhilis' ability to enact new laws.

Given that the Constitution has also only been amended recently, this would additionally allow time for citizens to use the reform allowing them to appeal to the Constitutional Court. The first parliamentary vote since the Constitutional reforms is set to occur on March 19th and new party registrations have already been widespread, raising international hopes that Kazakhstan may finally be turning a corner towards becoming a true multiparty democracy.

News Sources:

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Kazakhstan declared a nationwide state of emergency after protests over a fuel price hike erupted into clashes and saw demonstrators storm government buildings, Jan. 5, 2022. Photo Credit: AFP

