

DEMOCRATIC AND SOCIAL REFORM IN KAZAKHSTAN – A MODEL FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRANSITION?



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Democratic and Social Reform in Kazakhstan – A Model for Social and Political Transition?

“Kazakhstan has come a long way in the two decades since it achieved independence from the Soviet Union. [The 2011] presidential election illustrates just how far it's come. The Central Asian giant has succeeded in moving a great distance toward a free and open democracy.”

Daniel Witt, Vice Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Eurasia Foundation, 11th
April 2011.

“At this [2005] election, Kazakhstan has taken a major step forward in becoming a full democracy. The international community should encourage Kazakhstan to pursue the process of embedding its democratic institutions and to create a genuinely free society.”

The Rt. Hon. Lord Parkinson, former Secretary of State for Energy for the United Kingdom, and leader of an independent group of British parliamentarians observing the presidential election, 5th December 2005

Democratisation: An Unending Journey

Democratisation is a lengthy process which in the West took many decades, or even centuries to complete, depending on one's view of the evolutionary steps involved. The prominent political scientist Robert Dahl posits that no contemporary country can proclaim itself a full democracy since every country, including Western democracies, still falls short of the democratic ideal in some or several respects.¹

In many ways, then, democratic transition is an unending journey. Not only does democratisation take a prolonged period of time but it is contingent on several necessary or sufficient conditions, among them being the presence of a market economy, a civil society, a high level of economic equality, and a middle class.

Upon Independence, Kazakhstan was confronted with the twin tasks of establishing a market economy and democracy simultaneously, from scratch. Few challenges could be greater than completing this “double transition” within a decade or two. Yet – as we shall explore in this Paper - this is what Kazakhstan has attempted to do since 1991.²

¹Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (Yale University Press, 1989).

²<http://personal.akorda.kz/en/category/statyi/1452>

Has democratisation been successful? Kazakhstan does not pretend to have yet reached the level of Western democracies in an electoral sense³. However, Kazakhstan has made continuous and genuine progress in each parliamentary and presidential election held, as recognised by foreign observers including those from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and is gradually aligning its political institutions with best practice in the Western democracies.

Kazakhstan can also pride itself with having set in place the essential preconditions for democratic governance - a market economy, a middle class, and civil society. Human rights have been strengthened over the past two decades -⁴ Perhaps most important of all, it has maintained stability and inter-ethnic harmony throughout, which is not only key to a successful transition but also a virtue to be commended in itself. This is no mean achievement in a country hosting 130 different ethnic groups and 17 religions.

A Phased Transition or Democratic “Big Bang”?

Democratisation in one stroke - or a democratic “big bang” - was an option open to Kazakhstan upon Independence. While this potentially could have been viable, history has shown that such non-evolutionary democratisation is fraught with peril if the necessary preconditions for democratic governance are not already in place. Almost half a century ago, for example, the late Harvard University professor Samuel Huntington wrote that rapid social change coupled with overly hasty political liberalisation was responsible for the violence and instability of his era in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, necessitating a phased democratic transition in the modernising countries of these regions.⁵

Recognising that economic development is closely correlated with political development and that Western transitions to democracy were evolutionary and gradual, Kazakhstan instead opted to follow a formula of “economics first, politics second” meaning that “every step of Kazakhstan’s political reforms is closely tied to economic progress.”⁶

This model has served Kazakhstan well and corresponds with the priorities of Kazakh citizens. When polled in a nationwide survey conducted by IPSOS, 86% of respondents said they felt “positive” about their own country in general, 70% felt positive about the country’s economy, while 81% said they felt Kazakhstan “had become a better place in which to live over the past ten years.” When asked about the most pressing issues facing Kazakhstan, only 2% of respondents mentioned democratic reform, while 26% identified jobs as the most pressing issue, 15% housing, and 11% economic growth.⁷

³http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/kazakhstans-steady-progress-toward-democracy/2011/03/28/AF1XPKCC_story.html

⁴<http://www.aninews.in/newsdetail2/story182000/kazakhstan-joins-asia-pacific-forum-of-national-human-rights-institutions-as-associate-member.html>

⁵Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Yale University Press, 1968), p.4-5.

⁶<http://www.kazakhembus.com/document/address-by-kazakhstan-president-nursultan-nazarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050>

⁷<http://www.amb-kazakhstan.fr/Documents/interview%20Minister%20Idrissov.pdf>

That the vast majority of Kazakhs are content with the country's development is, to quote the late Lord Fraser, former Solicitor-General of Scotland, "hardly surprising given that President Nazarbayev has firmly established his ethnically diverse country as an island of stability and relative prosperity."⁸

Kazakhstan's chances of making it into the league of full-fledged democracies were slim upon Independence, absent the essential preconditions which all of the countries belonging to this category share. Eighty percent of the 25 countries in the world that *The Economist* considers to be "full democracies" are concentrated in Europe and North America, which also is the cradle of modern democracy. All of them are high income countries and all, with few exceptions, evolved gradually.⁹ Kazakhstan's aspiration is to reach this status within decades, not through any shortcuts, but by following their tried and tested path.

Anchoring Democratisation: Kazakhstan's Economic Development, Growing Middle Class, and Social Reforms

The first step in this endeavour is to achieve rapid and sustained economic development with a strong middle class as the anchor of reforms. Kazakhstan's economic growth between 2000 and 2010, the third fastest in the world behind Qatar and China, has put it on target to surmount this first hurdle.

In 2013, Kazakhstan's GDP per capita stood at \$12,843, making it an upper-middle-income country ahead of Brazil and just behind Poland and Turkey.¹⁰ From 2001 to 2010, average monthly wages grew more than 500% and unemployment was halved. Kazakhstan's middle class is developing rapidly as a result of this growth and today, according to some assessments, makes up approximately 25% of the population.¹¹

The privatisation of state assets is also nearing completion. Whereas Kazakh industries in 1991 were under complete state control and the entrepreneurial class was nearly absent, the private sector is today the backbone of the economy. In 2011, for instance, there were more than 700,000 small- and medium-sized businesses.¹²

Kazakhstan's economic prosperity has given citizens and the middle class a stronger stake in society which, in turn, will serve to strengthen accountable government.¹³ New political parties have formed representing different strata of the population – for example the *Democratic Party of Kazakhstan Ak Zhol* and *The Nationwide Social Democratic Party*. A professional state staffed by modern and efficient managers has been set up in conjunction, incorporating many of the country's most talented youth returning from state-sponsored "Bolashak" scholarships abroad. Bolashak, which

⁸<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/kazakhstans-path-toward-democracy/430918.html>

⁹http://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy_Index_2010_web.pdf

¹⁰<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2014/01/weodata/index.aspx>

¹¹<http://www.kazakhembus.com/page/kazakhstan-democracy>

¹²http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/kazakhstans-steady-progress-toward-democracy/2011/03/28/AF1XPKCC_story.html

¹³http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/kazakhstans-steady-progress-toward-democracy/2011/03/28/AF1XPKCC_story.html

was started on November 5, 1993, can claim credit for having paid for the education of no less than 10,346 young Kazakhs abroad.¹⁴

The healthcare system has been thoroughly reformed. Government expenditure in this sphere has grown from 46 billion tenge in 1999 to 631 billion tenge in 2011, improving public health overall and cutting maternal mortality rates, for instance, by almost 300%. Education expenditures have risen by a factor of 9.5 over the past 15 years and an Education Development Government Program has modernised education at all levels, from pre-school to higher education. In total, 942 schools and 758 hospitals have been built across the country since 1999.¹⁵

Kazakhstan's political reforms have been undertaken in lockstep with this economic transition and state-building and, hence, have become more rapid over the past decade. The past ten years can, for good reasons, be termed Kazakhstan's decade of democratic reform.

2004-2014: The Decade of Democratic Reform

"You must first enable the government to control the governed," James Madison once remarked, "and, in the next place, oblige it to control itself." While Kazakhstan's first decade of Independence focused primarily on the first, the past fourteen years have been defined by the second.

The 2004 Election Law was a key document which initiated and guided this transition. Even while the OSCE suggested further revisions immediately after the Law's enactment, the organisation nonetheless acknowledged that it "provided the basis for increased transparency to the overall election process."¹⁶ A further OSCE judgment considered the amendments to the election law before and after the 2004 parliamentary elections to constitute "significant progress".¹⁷

Among the improvements noted in the OSCE's final report in 2004 were: First, the presence of both opposition and pro-government parties among the twelve parties competing in the vote. Second, seven TV debates were considered to have given the parties "an opportunity to inform the public of their views." Contrary to some media reports, the OSCE found "no cases of media outlets being shut down or journalists being prosecuted". Third, the authorities demonstrated an openness to international observation "*beyond* their OSCE commitments". And fourthly, Central Election Commission (CEC) voter education efforts were executed "professionally and effectively".¹⁸

That 59% of the registered voters showed up at the polls suggests that speculation about "voter fatigue" in Kazakhstan was premature.¹⁹ The same voter turnout was

¹⁴<http://www.kazakhembus.com/document/address-by-kazakhstan-president-nursultan-nazarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050>

¹⁵<http://www.kazakhembus.com/document/address-by-kazakhstan-president-nursultan-nazarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050>

¹⁶<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/38915?download=true>

¹⁷<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/18153?download=true>

¹⁸<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/38915?download=true>

¹⁹http://www.silkroadstudies.org/docs/publications/2005/0409Starr_Kazakhstan.pdf

registered in the U.K. parliamentary elections three years earlier.²⁰ Stated differently, Kazakh citizens turned out on Election Day in the belief that their vote actually counted.

As noted by Professor Frederick Starr of Johns Hopkins University, the 2004 parliamentary election “leads inexorably to the conclusion that Kazakhstan’s recent elections mark a real and even notable step forward. The Kazakhs, and the western public, deserve to know this. Democracy in Kazakhstan is not just a hollow declaration.”²¹

Pro-democracy activists believe, as in France, that the Kazakh political system is weighted too heavily in the President’s favour. Nonetheless, the OSCE considered the 2005 election to have been “a process which was mostly inclusive and provided voters with an opportunity for choice.”²² Observers also “assessed voting positively in 92 per cent of polling stations visited.”²³

Observing the 2005 Presidential Election, Robert L. Barry – a former U.S. Ambassador and OSCE Head of Mission – declared that the poll “was a step forward”. Particularly noteworthy, in his opinion, was “the publication of election results broken down by polling station...[This] represented another major step forward towards transparency, since observers are now able to verify that the counts in polling station protocols were carried over into the vote totals reported by the Central Election Commission.”²⁴

When discussing the length of President Nazarbayev’s presidency, it should also be recalled that prior to the constitutional change in France in 2008, there were no term limits on the French presidency, and its powers closely approximate those of its Kazakh equivalent. President Nazarbayev’s popularity is chiefly attributed to the extraordinary economic progress the country has made under his rule. That is why citizens in 2011 called for a referendum to keep him in office until 2020 which, incidentally, was rejected by the President who instead called for early presidential elections. This decision by President Nazarbayev is further evidence of his desire to create a genuine and enduring democracy for the long-term.²⁵

Plans for further political reform were further developed and debated after the parliamentary elections in 2004 and presidential elections in 2005. A State Committee on Democratisation was formed in 2005, which elaborated a number of recommendations to further democratise the Kazakh political system. Among the proposed changes were a strengthened parliament, new political parties, enhanced media freedoms, and a more transparent judiciary.²⁶

²⁰<http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?id=77>

²¹http://www.silkroadstudies.org/docs/publications/2005/0409Starr_Kazakhstan.pdf

²²<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/18153?download=true>

²³<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/18153?download=true>

²⁴<http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/10519-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2005-12-14-art-10519.html>

²⁵<http://www.kazakhembus.com/page/kazakhstan-democracy>

²⁶<http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/156739-kazakhstan-makes-real-progress-toward-democracy#ixzz38HuCBpE7>

In March 2006, President Nazarbayev likewise called for a transformation of Kazakhstan's political life and strengthening of the country's democracy. His proposals include the introduction of elections for akims (mayors) at district levels and bringing forward a bill on local self-government – both of which are now in effect.²⁷ The election of governors will go a long way to ensuring that the electorate is not pressured by local bureaucrats to support candidates in national elections belonging to the same party as governors who have been appointed - an almost unavoidable flaw in democracies and other political systems that rely on gubernatorial appointment.²⁸

Constitutional amendments in 2007 strengthened both accountability and the system of “checks and balances” in a similar way. The presidential term was reduced from seven to five years; the lower chamber of Kazakhstan's parliament (Mazhlis) adopted proportional representation; the Senate was given the power of consultation when appointing the Chairman (Governor) of the National Bank; the number of Mazhlis deputies were increased to 107; the funding for political parties was enhanced; the government was to be held accountable not only to the President but also to parliament; and the composition of the government was now to be determined by the Prime Minister

Evaluating the 2007 parliamentary elections, the OSCE acknowledged that the seven registered political parties contested the election in an “overall inclusive and transparent manner” and gave voters a “measure of choice”. Media and televised debates also “provided voters with differing political viewpoints.”²⁹

In 2009, Kazakhstan adopted further legislation on mass media, elections, political parties, and local government to align Kazakhstan's laws with OSCE standards. The legislative changes were drafted in close cooperation with NGOs, political parties and OSCE institutions. The results were viewed positively and, in the opinion of the Chargé d'Affaires of the U.S. Mission to the OSCE, “marked a step forward on Kazakhstan's path to democracy”.³⁰

The 2009 Law on Elections now guarantees representation of a minimum of two parties in Parliament, even if one of them does not win enough votes to pass the 7% threshold. The Law on Political Parties, enacted in the same year, significantly reduced the bureaucratic burden for registering a political party, provided public financing of political parties to strengthen their role in public life, and simplified the party registration process.³¹

These reforms are significant advances, and the most recent parliamentary election in 2012 highlighted this fact. For example, according to the OSCE, “the preparations were technically well administered”; the legal changes constituted an “improvement”; the “Central Election Commission (CEC) and lower-level election commissions were

²⁷ http://prosites-kazakhembus.homestead.com/Kazakhstan_in_Brief.html

²⁸ http://www.silkroadstudies.org/docs/publications/2005/0409Starr_Kazakhstan.pdf

²⁹ <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/28438?download=true>

³⁰ <http://www.kazakhembus.com/document/address-by-kazakhstan-president-nursultan-nazarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050>

³¹ <http://www.kazakhembus.com/document/address-by-kazakhstan-president-nursultan-nazarbayev-strategy-kazakhstan-2050>

co-operative overall towards the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission (EOM)” and “ran an extensive voter education campaign”; the “OSCE/ODIHR EOM positively assessed the quality of the voter lists”; it “received no reports of major impediments to the campaigns”; “election officials were observed to be largely knowledgeable and experienced”; and the 26 women elected to parliament were a considerable increase on previous years. The CEC also “ran an extensive voter education campaign using billboards, various TV spots and posted materials on its website, including information on voter registration, the use of absentee voter certificates (AVCs), and general voter information.”³²

Elsa Papademetriou, the Head of the Delegation of the Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly, stated that “These elections proved to be a move in the right direction.”³³ Likewise, Haluk Ipek, Representative of Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic Speaking countries (TURKPA) said that all conditions “for fair and free expression of popular will” were met.³⁴

75% of registered voters showed up at the polls and nearly a quarter of the parliamentary seats were decided by runoffs. This suggests that the elections were genuinely competitive. There were, as occurs in elections in all countries, a number of complaints by volunteering observers representing the political parties. These were duly investigated by the office of the Prosecutor-General. Moreover, Kazakhstan fully lived up to its commitment to invite and host international observers, above and beyond the standards required by the OSCE.

Civil Society, Media Freedoms, and e-Government

Kazakhstan’s civil society was in an embryonic state at the time of Independence in 1991.³⁵ Citizens had little experience of associating with each other, and a strong civil society, autonomous from the State, had never existed in the Soviet Union.

Together with partners from Europe and the United States, Kazakhstan has invested a considerable effort in creating a legal environment for NGO growth and development. Thousands of Kazakh NGO staff have been trained since the early to mid-1990s by the UNDP, USAID, the OSCE and other domestic and international organisations, to strengthen their role and visibility in public life.³⁶

This work appears to have paid off. Kazakhstan ranked higher than most in USAID’s 2009 NGO Sustainability Index and recorded one of the highest levels of NGO sector development in the Commonwealth of Independent States. The number of Kazakh NGOs were also expected to grow even further due to the “stable domestic policy climate laws that are favourable to NGOs.”³⁷ The fruits of this work can be seen in the 25,000 non-profit organisations active in Kazakhstan, which

³²<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/89401?download=true>

³³<http://www.kazakhembus.com/page/parliamentary-elections-january-15-2012>

³⁴<http://www.kazakhembus.com/page/parliamentary-elections-january-15-2012>

³⁵<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/CSO/0,,contentMDK:20101499~menuPK:244752~pagePK:220503~piPK:220476~theSitePK:228717,00.html>

³⁶<http://www.kazakhembus.com/page/kazakhstan-democracy>

³⁷<http://www.kazconsulny.org/en/page.php?id=6c>

actively involve about 550,000 people. This should be compared with the figure of roughly 1,600 NGOs registered in the period between 1994 and 1997.³⁸

The biannual “Civic Forum”, launched in 2003, further propelled NGO expansion. As noted by Elizabeth Warner, Program Director for Central Asia at the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (an American-based NGO)³⁹: “The Civic Forum... proves that the partnership between Kazakh society and the Government is deepening... simplified registration laws, the participation of NGOs in policymaking at the national and regional levels, and the beginning of more favourable tax laws that will promote private philanthropy.”⁴⁰

Media freedoms have expanded in parallel with the development of civil society. Indeed, they are an integral part of it. Kazakh citizens today have access to more than 2,000 media outlets, 85 percent of which are privately owned. Newspapers, TV, and radio channels provide news and entertainment in 11 languages, including German, Uzbek, Ukrainian, Turkish and Uighur. Media in ethnic minority languages are also eligible for State grants and other financial support.⁴¹

The information revolution has further enhanced interconnectivity and citizen access to media outlets. The number of mobile cellular subscriptions is today among the highest in the world.⁴² Its effect on government and democratisation is tangible. Kazakhstan presently ranks 28th among 193 countries in the United Nations’ global index on e-government development, ahead of such advanced countries as Switzerland.⁴³ More than 43,000 users visit Kazakhstan’s e-government portal every day, where they can access public services, ranging from registering for kindergarten to paying household utility bills.

In recognition of this advance, Astana in October this year hosted the Global e-Government Forum, gathering governmental authorities, business and international organisations from dozens of countries.⁴⁴ This event would have been unthinkable in 1992 when Kazakhstan’s economy was in its infancy, with barely one million fixed telephone lines, and the barest capacity to provide essential public services.⁴⁵

“Every Constitution Has Its Time and Place”

In Bayeux in 1946, Charles de Gaulle remarked that “every constitution has its time and place”. He spoke in the context of explaining the concentration of powers in the French Presidency under the Fifth Republic. Kazakhstan’s model of democratisation draws quite deliberately on this thinking and historical precedent. The model first originated in France has helped to deliver, at least in part,

³⁸<http://www.kazakhembus.com/page/kazakhstan-democracy>

³⁹<http://www.icnl.org/>

⁴⁰<http://www.kazakhembus.com/page/kazakhstan-democracy>

⁴¹<http://www.kazakhembus.com/page/kazakhstan-democracy>

⁴²http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.CEL.SETS.P2?order=wbapi_data_value_2013+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=asc

⁴³http://unpan3.un.org/egovkb/portals/egovkb/documents/un/2014-survey/e-gov_complete_survey-2014.pdf

⁴⁴<http://en.trend.az/casia/kazakhstan/2288893.html>

⁴⁵<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/AT%26T+TO+MODERNIZE+KAZAKHSTAN+TELECOM-a011945294>

Kazakhstan's immense prosperity and, no less importantly, allowed for democratisation to take root while maintaining social tranquillity and public support. This work progresses daily. On September 2, 2014, for example, President Nazarbayev pledged to further decentralise the Kazakh political system by transferring additional functions and powers to local government bodies, especially in agriculture and the provision of public services.⁴⁶

In 2010, Kazakhstan was entrusted with the chairmanship of the OSCE, the first by a post-Soviet and predominantly Muslim country. The strengthening of democratic institutions, rule of law, gender balance and tolerance all ranked high on its agenda.⁴⁷ In the same year, Astana hosted the first OSCE summit in 11 years, which was widely considered a success. Apart from consistent work on all "three baskets" of the OSCE, one of Kazakhstan's major contributions during its chairmanship was that the organisation firmly embraced the concept of an indivisible European and Eurasian security.

President Nazarbayev has publicly and repeatedly acknowledged that much work remains to be done in the democratic transition.⁴⁸ His approach to government is based on the belief that successful democratisation has historically tended to begin with parliamentary reforms, the gradual strengthening of legislatures, and the formation of stable and functional political parties. As noted by Axel Hadenius and Jan Teorell of Uppsala University, Sweden: "...the limited multiparty system stands out as the prime stepping-stone to democracy. The fact that this regime type has become the most common...can be seen as a promising sign for the future."⁴⁹ In view of Kazakhstan's rapid economic progress, stability, and self-evident societal harmony, the country surely warrants the epithet of "a model" in this form of democratic transition.

⁴⁶http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics_sub/Nazarbayev-on-decentralization-of-powers-in-Kazakhstan-255870/

⁴⁷http://www.kazakhembus.com/sites/default/files/documents/Kazakhstan_OSCE_Chairmanship_Priorities.pdf

⁴⁸http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/kazakhstans-steady-progress-toward-democracy/2011/03/28/AF1XPKCC_story.html

⁴⁹<http://kellogg.nd.edu/publications/workingpapers/WPS/331.pdf>

ABOUT

Kazakhstan's Bid to Secure a Non-Permanent Seat on the United Nations Security Council for 2017/18

www.kazakhstanunsc.com

In September 2013, Kazakhstan announced its bid to secure a seat as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council in the years 2017/18.

As a regional leader and global partner in matters of energy security, and a valuable contributor to international peacekeeping missions, Kazakhstan wishes to bring its unique experience and expertise to bear on some of the pressing challenges currently facing the UNSC.

Its bid is based on four central pillars: [food security](#), [water security](#), [energy security](#) and [nuclear security](#).

KazakhstanUNSC.com, its publications, and its occasional newsletters and bulletins aim to set out, in clear and concise terms, the main policy priorities of Kazakhstan's UNSC bid. The multilingual website also supplies details of political, economic and social developments inside Kazakhstan and about its international foreign policy initiatives.

Kazakhstan has the experience, political will and resources to make a valuable contribution to the global challenges faced by the UNSC. It is fully engaged in its commitment to assume such responsibilities on the Security Council.

Home to over 130 different ethnic groups, Kazakhstan is nothing less than a microcosm of the United Nations. In the spirit of a committed and principled partner in the family of nations, the Republic of Kazakhstan has announced its bid to become a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in the years 2017/18.

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