

An Election in Kazakhstan Will Offer Something New: A Multiparty System
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By Andrew E. Kramer

ASTANA, Kazakhstan — This capital city has been abuzz for weeks with the latest political news: Soon there will be politics. After an election scheduled for Sunday, Kazakhstan's Parliament will be guaranteed, under a new law, to consist of more than one political party.

That might not generate much interest elsewhere, but, for the past five years, every elected member of the Kazakh lower chamber was a member of the pro-government Nur Otan party, making for dull debates.

The government is praising the change to a multiparty system as a step toward liberalization in Kazakhstan, a United States ally considered important to world oil markets as a major producer outside of the Middle East. In comments reported by his press service when the election was announced in November, President Nursultan Nazarbayev said, "Society needs a multiparty system."

Since the Arab uprising, speculation has swirled over whether similar protests could spread to the 50 million or so mostly Muslim residents of former Soviet Central Asia; in four of the five successor states — Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan — ossified authoritarian leaders have ruled unchallenged for decades.

The elections here seem, in part, a pre-emptive response. But critics among Kazakh politicians and analysts of the region say that, while the baby step toward reform is good, little will actually change.

Of the seven parties running in Sunday's election besides Nur Otan, six are closely affiliated with the government. The government has disqualified from the ballot the co-chairman of the only bona fide opposition party in the running. Two parties were not allowed to compete at all.

Whether the change will be sufficient to tamp down emerging signs of discontent remains to be seen; the country has a long history of reforms that turn out to be feints.

Five years ago, a nominally independent but, in fact, transparently pro-government party shared power in Parliament with the Nur Otan party. Then, the second party, Asar, was led by the president's daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva. Real opposition figures scoffed at any notion of its independence.

That system collapsed when Ms. Nazarbayeva withdrew from public life after her husband, Rakhat Aliyev, a once-powerful figure in Kazakhstan's secret police, fell out with her father, the president. Mr. Aliyev was forced into exile.

The Asar party then merged with Nur Otan, forming the one-party system in place until Parliament was dissolved in November ahead of the elections.

In another sign of a thaw, however tepid, in Central Asian politics, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow in neighboring Turkmenistan said that he, too, would introduce a multiparty Parliament.

It is too early to tell whether the political systems in Central Asia are showing their natural obsolescence, or whether true change will come only after the death of the current, aging and baldly authoritarian Soviet-era leaders.

Even the modest change in Kazakhstan is remarkable because Mr. Nazarbayev, a former Soviet apparatchik, has presided for two decades over a well-established system of one-man, one-party rule.

As in Russia under Vladimir V. Putin, Mr. Nazarbayev has blended deft economic policies that have drastically raised living standards with soft authoritarian methods like police repression of dissidents.

Mr. Nazarbayev has called this an Asian model of "economy first, politics second." Even during the global recession, Kazakhstan's economy grew 7 percent last year.

In foreign policy, according to critics of United States policy in the region, the so-called Southern Corridor of former Soviet nations, major American oil company contracts and aid in shipping supplies to Afghanistan greased a friendly diplomatic relationship with Washington, despite the democratic shortcomings.

Yet Kazakhstan has only the barest fig leaf of a democratic system; in presidential elections in April, Mr. Nazarbayev, who is 71, won 95.5 percent of the vote. His nearest competitor garnered 1.9 percent.

Emblematic of politics, Kazakh style, one ostensibly opposition candidate, Mels Yeleusizov, announced that he had voted for his competitor, Mr. Nazarbayev, in that election.

"I didn't want to become president because that is not possible," Mr. Yeleusizov, now a candidate in an opposition party in Sunday's vote, said in a telephone interview.

But last year, Kazakhstan was shaken by unrest, including terrorist attacks and a labor dispute that unraveled into riots in the oil industry town of Zhanoazen in December, during which police officers shot into a crowd, killing at least 16 people and wounding more than 80.

In late November, while the labor dispute was continuing but before the shootings, Mr. Nazarbayev dissolved the one-party Parliament and called early elections.

Those will be held under an electoral law changed in 2009 that guarantees seats to at least two parties, by removing the usual 7 percent threshold for the second-place finisher. The governing party regularly garners more than 80 percent of the vote.

More changes are coming, officials say. "You will see, over the next three years, very slow, very gradual liberalization," Roman Vassilenko, the chief spokesman for Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry, said in an interview here. "The key reason is the president himself sees the need for a more balanced political system."

But the party polling in second place for Sunday's vote, Ak Zhol, has among its members businessmen and government officials who do not criticize the government.

Critics of the electoral overhaul say it allows the government to perpetuate the dominance of a single party while avoiding the embarrassment, and potential for domestic protests, of a patently rigged system. In this view, the modest political changes here will prolong the repressive government, not lead to its replacement.

"The multiparty nature of Parliament will be decorative, as it is in Russia," Vladimir I. Kozlov, the chairman of the main liberal opposition party, Alga, which was denied registration for years, said in a phone interview.

He continued, "The other parties just create the illusion of differing opinions, not in fact having any influence on the dominant party or the president."

Of the 107 seats in the country's Parliament, known as the Mazhilis, 98 are elected and nine appointed by a council of ethnic minority leaders, which is loyal to the president.

In its 20 years since independence, Kazakhstan has yet to hold an election judged fair by Western observers.

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