



Caspian Information Centre

Reform Kazakh-style

*Nazarbayev's aim is to introduce
democratic change without threatening stability*

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"I do not believe that liberty and democracy are alien to Asia ... But nor do I believe it is possible in any country – Asian or non-Asian – which lacks experience, to introduce democracy at a stroke without risking trouble."

Margaret Thatcher, *"Statecraft: Strategies for a Changing World"*

Introduction

Nursultan Nazarbayev, the President of Kazakhstan, will have been in power for almost 25 years if he completes his present seven year term of office in 2012. The last phase of his political career will be crucial. Both Kazakhstan's future and Nazarbayev's reputation as the

founding father of the modern Kazakh state will rest very considerably on the course he follows during this period and the extent to which this facilitates the peaceful transfer of executive power to a democratically elected successor.

In the words of one Central Asia expert, the people of Kazakhstan need to be able to see a future that extends beyond the person and presidency of Nazarbayev¹ - or at least to glimpse such a future. If Nazarbayev himself makes this possible, while continuing to build on his country's economic success story, his place in the history books will be assured; no other CIS leader will be able to lay claim to achievements on a comparable scale. He has wisely avoided the cult of personality, but, if successful, Nazarbayev, the son of a nomadic shepherd, will deserve the statues of him that will be erected in every Kazakh city.

The Need for Balance

Nazarbayev's reputation to-date depends upon his country's successful exploitation of its energy resources, shrewd macro-economic decisions that have enabled Kazakhstan to avoid the worst aspects of the so-called "oil curse", and the skilful the management of relations with both the US and his big-power neighbours, Russia and China. He has also delivered significant advances in the material standards of the Kazakh people; these, together with the fears of instability following the "coloured revolutions" elsewhere in the region, account for his popularity and his landslide victory in the 4th December 2005 Presidential election.

Having raised living standards and introduced important advances in the area of social provision, Nazarbayev has now promised a form of evolutionary democratic reform which recognises his country's distinctive characteristics and traditions. Claims by opposition leaders that his election victory would be followed by a reversion to authoritarian rule do not appear to be borne out by events; the evidence suggests that Nazarbayev is serious about decentralising power and in developing his country's infant democracy, but that he

¹ Fiona Hill, "Whither Kazakhstan?" *The National Interest*, Winter 2005/2006

also recognises the dangers that lie in the path of reform. The extent of these should not be underestimated. Jean Kirkpatrick, the former US Ambassador to the United Nations, has written eloquently about the problems of democratic transition:

“[In traditional autocracies] the fabric of authority unravels quickly when the power and status of the man at the top are undermined or eliminated. The longer the autocrat has held power, and the more pervasive his personal influence, the more dependent a nation’s institutions will be on him. Without him, the organised life of society will collapse, like an arch from which the keystone has been removed.”²

The political chaos which occurred in Indonesia following the departure from office of President Suharto provides an example of what can occur in a society which is attempting rapid democratic change but in which, until recently, all the important decisions have been taken by a single leader. Unlike Indonesia during Suharto’s last years in office, economic conditions in Kazakhstan are relatively benign. Nazarbayev also has the advantage of a growing reputation in Washington as the only credible Central Asian political leader with whom it is possible to cooperate in the fight against terrorism and international drug trafficking. Nevertheless, it is clear that the risks entailed in democratic advance and the appropriate pace of change are the constant preoccupations of the President.

Arguing that economic liberalisation must come before political reform if the latter is to succeed, the Kazakh president has frequently warned of the dangers of premature or ill-considered political change. In a speech to mark the 10th anniversary of Kazakhstan Independence, the President warned that:

“... in the conditions of the lack of competitiveness in the economy and weak civil society, hasty unprepared radical political reforms could cause social destabilisation and the rejection of liberal values ... Idealism in politics can have sorrowful consequences. We cannot risk our children’s

² Jean Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” *Commentary*, November 1979

future by taking a hasty step and destroying all that we have achieved in recent years through hard work.”³

In an article in the Washington Times which was clearly addressed to those in the West who were urging more rapid change, he wrote:

“When friends tell me that we are still not moving quickly enough I am tempted to reply: ‘Bearing in mind how far and how quickly we have travelled, how much faster would you like us to go? In steering the infant Kazakh economy, the accelerator has been used far more than the brake. Please remember also just how long your own societies took to complete the processes on which we are now embarked!’”⁴

On other occasions, the President has argued that economic liberalisation and democratic reform are complementary, and must go hand in hand.

Plainly the transition from totalitarian rule to democracy requires difficult changes of attitudes and mores which can take longer to achieve than institutional change. Even the reformers within Kazakhstan’s ruling elite sometimes express ambivalence about the desirability of change. One senior member of the administration told the author:

“Some days of the week I think and feel like New Democratic Man. On other days of the week the old habits and ways of thinking assert themselves. I know we need to go further, but there are times when I am ambivalent about reform because I know how difficult and painful the adjustments can be. I feel them myself.”

Factors which place limits on the speed and scope of change include the obvious immaturity of Kazakhstan’s opposition parties and their evident failure to find themes and issues which resonate with the electorate, the fragile nature of much of civil society which remains in its infancy, and the need to ensure that political and economic change

³ Speech to mark the 10th Anniversary of the Kazakh Constitution, Astana, 31st August 2005

⁴ Nursultan Nazarbayev, “Why there can be no prosperity or democracy without stability,” Washington, 4th March 2004

does not disturb the hitherto stable relations between the country's complex mosaic of religious and ethnic groups.

However, taken together, the President's recent speeches and the measures so far announced suggest that he has concluded that the country's economic and social development has developed sufficiently for a cautious but systematic programme of democratic change to occur, and for wide public debate to take place about what is envisaged.

In a speech to the first meeting of the State Commission on Democracy, a consultative body chaired by the President and comprising MPs, some members of the opposition and representatives of NGOs and civil society, the President sounded an unequivocal note when he declared:

“Democracy is a choice of civilised people and it is our choice. We fully intend to continue consistent democratic reforms and political modernisation of our country.”

The President also called for *“a more dynamic modernisation of the entire system of social and political relations which will allow Kazakhstan to become a fully fledged and respected member of the international community.”*⁵

However, even in this important speech – his most radical to date – the President sounded the need to strike a balance between the need for rapid change and the need to preserve stability:

“Today we need to strike an optimal balance between the speed of democratic change and the preservation of a stable equilibrium and high level of political legitimacy for the existing political system ... The foundation of our strategy of political reforms lies primarily in the stability of our society and a broad public agreement on basic values of modernisation of Kazakhstan.”

⁵ Speech to the State Commission on Democratisation, Astana, 24th March, 2006

A Programme of Reform

In March this year, the State Commission for Democracy laid down the broad outlines of a programme of democratic reform to be implemented in two stages, the first between 2006 to 2008 and the second between 2009-2011. Among the most immediate outcomes of the meeting of the State Commission were instructions from the President to the Central Government to:

- Finalise draft legislation for the decentralization of authority and implementation of local self-government, introducing bills in Parliament within the first half of this year. (There are more than 7,400 villages and 2,000 rural districts in Kazakhstan).
- Prepare the ground for holding new elections at the district level later this year. For villages, the President proposed holding elections for *kenes* (councils), local representative bodies which would elect their chairmen, thus completing the infrastructure of local self-government.
- Provide financing for the State Commission.

Setting out the key future priorities for the work of the Commission, he called on its members to concentrate its efforts on developing concrete mechanisms to achieve the following:

- Increase the participation of the Parliament in forming the central Government;
- Ensure that the Government consulted Parliament;
- Create a new and more effective system of budgetary controls, including further measures to combat corruption;
- Increase the number of deputies in the Majilis and the Senate.
- Develop legislation and “social mechanisms” of local self-government so as to strengthen the authority and accountability of *akims* (mayors) at local level;
- Strengthen the role and functions of political parties, NGOs and the media, “*whilst ensuring accountability, transparency and professionalism in accordance with the highest international standards.*”

Three months later, on 6th June, the Commission approved an action plan for democratic reform together a draft law on local governance. Under the plan, the *akims* of 49 districts and ten town councils who are presently directly appointed by the President will be elected by secret ballot on the basis of indirect suffrage. *Akims* will be elected to office for a period of four years by members of the *Maslikhats*, local elected assemblies which have previously enjoyed only a consultative function. Candidates will be nominated by regional *akims* on what is described as an alternative basis (i.e. the choice will be from more than two candidates).

Under the draft law, the *Kenes* (council) is to become the main administrative body in the provision of local services. By end of 2006, a Working Group comprising members of the State Commission will submit further proposals for democratic reform.

The changes so far announced constitute the first stage of a process of cautious change. Important decisions on the strengthening of parliament remain to be formulated and there will evidently be no rush to self-government at the local and regional level; *akims* will still not be elected directly but the *maslikhats*, previously only talking shops which will acquire greater significance while central control will be relaxed. Announcing the law on self-government, the President declared:

*“Under no circumstances should we lose control in the localities where the focus of reform is being switched ... It is often said that local government is democracy in action ... I think that the model of self-governance has to be a compromise which is adequate to the conditions of our country.”*⁶

The “compromise” to which the President refers clearly has the aim of striking the balance between democratic legitimacy and the need to preserve stability, the theme to which the President constantly returns.

Why Reform Matters

⁶ Speech to State Commission on Democratisation, Astana, 6th June 2006.

It is clear that the President believes that democratic change is not merely desirable in terms of securing better ways of providing “public goods” (i.e. services and infrastructure), but also vital if his country’s policy of international engagement is to succeed. In particular, his country’s claim to regional leadership, its pursuit of the OSCE chairmanship in 2009 and his evident desire that Kazakhstan should play a larger role on the world stage, are all dependent upon favourable international assessments of his country’s progress.

This in turn depends upon the President’s readiness to disperse power and to develop his country’s democratic institutions. While the risks inherent in political reform are acknowledged, political liberalisation is consequently seen as one of a package of complimentary measures which offer the best way forwards in terms of winning international approval and in creating an image of Kazakhstan as an increasingly open and exciting modern state which, against all the odds, is throwing off the shackles of the past.

It is true that political change may not be occurring sufficiently rapidly for some international NGOs, but the evident desire of the Nazarbayev administration to engage Western academics in the debate about Kazakhstan’s political and economic future, and the country’s enthusiasm to build cultural and educational ties with the US and Western Europe, provide tokens of a desire to establish a functioning liberal democracy. A President who was bent on preserving authoritarian rule would not have initiated the Bolashak system – under which 3,000 of the country’s best and brightest students win scholarships to attend foreign universities – most of them opting to study in America or Britain. The first generation to have passed through this scheme are now to be found in middle-ranking ministerial positions of government; further avenues of political advancement will be needed if a new generation of politically-conscious, Western-educated Kazakhs is not to become dissatisfied.

As Kazakh society becomes economically and socially diverse, new means will have to be found to mediate growing divergences of interests. At present, there is a danger that these will be determined as the result of struggles for influence and power between rival elites or factions within the existing elite; these will worsen in the absence

of a credible political opposition and measures to strengthen the role and authority of parliament.

The killing on 13th February of Altynbek Sarsenbayev, a prominent opposition politician, and the subsequent trial of a senior parliamentary official and members of the Kazakhstan security services, may be the consequence of one such struggle.⁷ Even where such struggles are resolved within the law, this is a process from which the public at large is excluded. With no clear successor to Nazarbayev emerging, the power struggle appears set to continue. New opportunities must, therefore, be found to bring on board those who wish to help shape their country's political future; and new channels through which political differences can be mediated are needed if the struggle is not to spill over into violence, thus threatening what has been achieved so far.

Critics – especially those who expect the reform process to follow Western patterns - will undoubtedly argue that the reforms that have been announced so far do not go far enough. But in the case of local government reform, Nazarbayev has been wise to proceed cautiously and use the basic building-blocks of local and regional administration and to retain the traditional title of *akim* rather than attempting to create a new and ambitious abstract model. Local government reform *is* important, both in order to ensure that the provision of local services displays sensitivity to local needs, and as a means of educating the people of Kazakhstan for the next stage of reform. The changes now being introduced are not the result of widespread public protest or the breakdown of the present system; while it retains many characteristics of the old Soviet top-down system it also makes extensive use of the private sector of the economy in the provision of goods and services.

The cautious, pragmatic approach which has characterized Nazarbayev's approach to local government reform is likely to be displayed in the proposals to come. These will need to be sufficiently bold to reconcile the conflicting needs of a more diverse society and economy, and to provide avenues of advancement for the new and

⁷ The trial of Yerzhan Utembayev, a former head of the Kazakhstan Senate Staff and one of ten defendants charged with Sarsenbayev's murder, opened in Almaty Regional Court in Taldykorgan on 14th June, 2006.

mostly Western-educated elite. But huge care will have to be taken to ensure that these do not generate expectations that cannot be realized or unleash forces that threaten constitutional rule.

What emerges from the present programme of reform is, consequently, unlikely to conform to Western conceptions of perfect democracy of the kind which the OSCE has in mind when measuring the progress of transitional states. But, as Margaret Thatcher has written, perfect democracy should never be allowed to become the enemy of the good; new measures must above all be practical.

