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## **KAZAKHSTAN: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION CAMPAIGN LIMPS TO FINISH LINE**

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18.03.2016

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Eurasianet, March 17, 2016

President Nursultan Nazarbayev at the headquarters of his ruling Nur Otan party in late February 2016. Does he want to get the elections out of the way early before Kazakhstans economic crisis intensifies? (Photo: Kazakh Presidential Press Service)

Many in Kazakhstan are not even sure what parties are contesting the March 20 parliamentary elections, other than President Nursultan Nazarbayevs ruling Nur Otan.

A flat and barely visible campaign season has done little to raise awareness or enthusiasm for a vote whose outcome — the renewal of Nur Otans ostensibly democratic mandate — is a given.

Not that there is any shortage of things for politicians to talk and complain about. The government has not succeeded in reducing the economys reliance on the export of raw natural resources, nor has it been able to curb rampant corruption, which stifles individual enterprise. Accordingly, Kazakhstan has been laid low by the slump in oil prices, which has led to job losses, hit living standards and sent the currency plunging and inflation rocketing.

With no credible or combative opposition parties standing, Nur Otan, whose name bears echoes of President Nursultan Nazarbayevs name, but means Light Fatherland, is guaranteed a landslide victory.

Polls of the electorate around Kazakhstan reveal that a majority intend to cast their ballots for Nur Otan, despite having scant awareness of its manifesto and even less knowledge about the five other parties running for seats in the Mazhilis (lower house).

I dont know which parties are standing, but I know Nur Otan. Im going to vote for Nur Otan, said

Roza, a 37-year-old street sweeper in the northeastern city of Semey (formerly Semipalatinsk), who declined to give her surname.

As Dosym Satpayev, director of the Kazakhstan Risks Assessment Group think-tank, told EurasiaNet.org, many ordinary voters in Kazakhstan don't even know what political parties we have, and even if they do know them, they don't know their ideological programs at all.

For many voters, Nur Otan's main draw is Nazarbayev, the 75-year-old former Communist party boss who has led the country since it gained independence in 1991. After a quarter of a century at the helm, Nazarbayev's popularity, which is unceasingly fanned by the state propaganda machine, shows no signs of abating.

It's Nazarbayev's party and it's a good party, said Valentina Kosacheva, an 80-year-old Nur Otan voter out shopping on a freezing March morning in downtown Semey. Everybody votes for it.

I'm for Nur Otan, echoed 27-year-old housewife Perezat Apasova. The president is a good person. He does everything for the people.

Nur Otan's election slogan — Unity! Stability! Creativity! — particularly resonates in northern Kazakhstan, which has a large population of ethnic Russians living along the 7,000-kilometer border with Russia.

Nazarbayev — who was re-elected president last year with a stunning 98 percent of the vote — has made ethnic unity a core component of his mission to maintain stability in this multiethnic nation, where Kazakhs make up two-thirds of the population and Russians are the largest minority, at one-fifth.

Nazarbayev's unity mantra has become even more forceful since the Kremlin's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula two years ago. That land grab sparked a wave of nationalist Russian fervor that even elicited calls for similar territorial claims on swaths of northern Kazakhstan.

Few voters, when surveyed, proved able to name a single one of the five parties challenging Nur Otan for seats in the 107-member Mazhilis. Ninety-eight MPs are elected by party list and nine are sent by the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, a grouping of presidential appointees representing the country's ethnic groups.

Kazakhstan has never held an election deemed free and fair by international observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which has previously pointed to a lack of pluralism in a political system dominated by Nazarbayev, as well as irregularities such as vote-rigging and ballot-stuffing.

Parties must clear a 7-percent electoral threshold to enter parliament. Analysts are predicting a new Mazhilis similar to the outgoing rubber-stamp legislature, which contained two token Nur Otan rivals that routinely supported the ruling party.

The smaller parties currently holding seats are the pro-business Ak Zhol (Bright Path), led by ex-Nur Otan apparatchik Azat Peruashev; and the Communist Peoples Party of Kazakhstan, led by Zhambyl Akhmetbekov.

Also standing are two small parties formed through mergers of pro-presidential forces: Serik Sultangalis Birlik (Unity) and Ali Bektayevs Auyl (Village) Peoples Patriotic Party.

The other contender is the Social Democratic Party of Kazakhstan, known by the acronym OSDP and led by former Nazarbayev regime insider-turned-opposition leader Zharmakhan Tuyakbay.

Billing itself as the elections sole opposition voice, the OSDP is fielding some prominent activists who have vocally criticized the government in the past, including Zauresh Battalova. She represented the OSDP in a lackluster TV debate aired on March 16, in which she — like participants from the other parties — refrained from attacks on Nazarbayev and Nur Otan. Since an acrimonious OSDP split in 2013, when Tuyakbay ousted his popular deputy, Amirzhan Kosanov, some critics no longer deem it a credible opposition force.

With most genuine opposition parties closed down, what we now see on the party scene are cloned parties of a single pro-presidential inclination, said Satpayev.

In recent years, only political forces that recognize the immutable authority of Nazarbayev can exist in Kazakhstan, Almaty-based analyst Kanat Nurov told EurasiaNet.org. Nurov sees Nur Otan as more an arm of Nazarbayevs political bureaucracy than a party battling for electoral loyalties.

Many voters opting for parties other than Nur Otan do not conceptualize their choice as a vote for

the opposition. Im voting Ak Zhol, said Aydana Khasenova, a 26-year-old lawyer hurrying to court in Semey, but I support the president.

Nazarbayev called the election nine months early, ostensibly to deliver a fresh parliamentary mandate to address the countrys economic downturn. But many observers also believe that the presidential administration wanted to get the elections out of the way before the crisis potentially bites even harder.

Some victims of the economic crunch say they will still vote for the ruling party, despite their economic hardship. Anzhela Khudaybergenova, 28, who runs a small business selling cosmetics in Semey, lamented falling sales at her outlet, but said she would still vote for Nur Otan as it represents peace and stability.

Not all those suffering from the downturn are so enthusiastic.

Im not taking any interest in the elections, because whatever happens, whoever the ruling power needs [in parliament] will be elected, said a disgruntled 50-year-old Almaty-based designer driven out of work by the downturn, speaking on condition of anonymity. Theres no democracy here.

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