
DID KAZAKHSTAN'S ELECTIONS MATTER?

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By Catherine Putz

Kazakh citizens went to the polls for early parliamentary elections on March 20. Nur Otan, President Nursultan Nazabayevs ruling party, picked up 83 parliamentary seats (it had previously held 82), with the remainder of the lower houses 98 directly-elected seats split between Ah Zhol and the Communist Peoples Party of Kazakhstan (CPPK).

Not only is the party composition of the legislature the same, but many of the same faces have returned. Forty percent of the new parliament had been members of the former convocation, and the new names are still old faces: established party apparatchiks and business people. The new parliament voted last Friday to keep the government as-is with Karim Masimov in the prime ministers seat.

RFE/RL noted that President Nursultan Nazarbayev did make one change to the government: replacing Energy Minister Vladimir Shkolnik. One of the roots of Kazakhstans present economic troubles is its reliance on oil and gas for revenue, so replacing the energy minister is at least symbolically satisfying.

In the wake of the election, which cost an estimated \$10.7 million, it has to be asked again, why did Kazakhstan bother and does the election matter?

The headline of Bruce Panniers analysis for RFE/RL didnt hold anything back: Make No Mistake, Kazakhstans Elections Still Meaningless. In criticizing the early elections when they were announced in January, I asked why, when the Presidents party already held a supermajority, was Kazakhstan bothering? I called the campaign boring and after the election I wrote What should have been a critical election was, in reality, a piece of theater designed to praise the countrys leader, despite the dark economic times.

The counter, of course, is that the election was exactly what the parliament said it would be, a reaffirmation, a vote of confidence necessary to continue with Nazarbayevs reform agenda. The results definitely reaffirm the ruling cadres place, whether the reform agenda [] any of its various names and numbers [] the real issues facing Kazakhstan is a different discussion. But what the election did do was give the government a pretense of public approval.

The Kazakhstani government uses early elections as the tool of strengthening current political institutes, including the position of the ruling Nur Otan party, Diana Gapak, a Russia and Central Asia analyst told The Diplomat. Gapak pointed out that while the composition of the parliament remained nearly identical, members of the Nur Otan party reaffirmed its success in the elections of maslikhats (regional and local representative bodies) by gaining all seats in several major regions. These lower-level elections have been largely absent from international conversation, but Gapak says this evidence of support for Nur Otan in regions across the country should not be underestimated.

The OSCEs preliminary report on the election was critical in the usual ways, citing a lack of genuine political choice and characterizing the countrys media environment as lacking independent sources. Still, the phrase some progress made it into the introduction and the report notes positive developments in a handful of areas. These developments, however, are mostly technical: six parties registered to run candidates, the election commission promised to be preparing electoral reforms and required parties to publish the amount of funds they received and spent, and state media showed a noticeable effort to meet formal requirements to provide contestants with equal access.

Kazakhstans election wasnt a democratic success [] included no debate of alternative policy ideas and the OSCE says election day was marred serious irregularities [] it was a success for Astana, certainly for Nazarbayev and his party. Their hope is that the narrative of a firm vote of confidence is enough of a mandate to maintain stability through difficult economic times and potential political agitation. It gives the government an easy retort to dissidents: Look, we won the election! (Its immaterial in this argument that the election wasnt seen as free or fair by Western observers.)

The 2016 snap elections have been definitely used to reassure citizens and investors that a new five-year mandate gives the government a solid ground for implementing new reforms and guaranteeing stability, Gapak says.

The real test [] with all elections, clean or dirty [] whether the election mattered will be what the new parliament does next.

Kaynak/Source: