

Electoral Processes in Central Asia and Its Impact on Regional Stability and Security

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the electoral system in Central Asia to date, the application of democratic principles in the elections that have taken place so far, the openness, transparency and directness of the electoral process, the stability of elections in the region. impact, the impact and status of electoral processes on democratic reforms.

KEYWORDS: *electoral procedure, democratic principles, parliamentary elections, civil rights, color revolutions, export of democracy, democracy in Kyrgyzstan, electoral system of Kazakhstan, political elections in Tajikistan, eastern democracy*

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In contemporary Central Asia, elections are as much political theatre as contests for office. After the break-up of the Soviet Union in late 1991, most of the countries in the region descended into one-man rule or civil war. The semi-competitive elections held in the last months of the Soviet order gave way to elections of acclamation in the first years of independence, with political power becoming increasingly centralized in the hands of the founding presidents of the republics. For a time it appeared that Kyrgyzstan might resist the temptation of authoritarianism; however, by the mid-1990s its president had begun to limit society's ability to hold the state and its representatives accountable. The election that brought to power the country's first president, Askar Akayev, illustrates the role of changing rules in shaping electoral outcomes. In the late Soviet era, parliaments selected the head of state – the chair of the Supreme Soviet - in each republic. In Kyrgyzstan, the election law stipulated that if the Parliament failed to produce a winner after two rounds of voting all the candidates would be disqualified. In October 1990, this quirk in the

electoral rules allowed Akayev—a little-regarded Gorbachev loyalist who was opposed to the dominant conservative forces in the Kyrgyz Communist Party – to win the next round of the parliamentary election for head of state of the Kyrgyz Republic. The following year, Kyrgyzstan, like most other Soviet republics, introduced popular direct elections for a newly-designed office of president whose powers supplanted those of the collapsing Communist Party. In October 1991, just weeks before Kyrgyzstan became an independent country, Akayev won the election for the presidency unopposed. He won the two subsequent presidential elections in December 1995 and October 2000 – by wide margins in the first round, although widespread violations were reported during both elections [1]. The rules governing presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan are a mixture of traditional and unconventional elements. Elections are held every five years and are decided by a two-round majority run-off system: if no candidate receives an absolute majority in the first round, the two candidates with the most votes proceed to a second round, where the

candidate with the most votes wins. New elections must be called if less than half the electorate turns out for either the first or the second round. Presidents may serve for no more than two terms, although the Constitutional Court in Kyrgyzstan, unlike its counterpart in the Russian Federation, made an exception for the sitting president by ruling that his first term did not count because it began before the limit of two terms was adopted in the 1993 constitution. To stand for president, a candidate must be at least 35 and not more than 65 years of age. Candidates must also satisfy several further requirements. First, they must undergo an examination by the Language Commission to ensure that they are fluent in the state language, Kyrgyz. This requirement, introduced to discourage Russians and Russified Kyrgyz from contesting the presidency, was used in the 2000 election to disqualify Akayev's most prominent challenger, Feliks Kulov. Second, they must pay from their personal funds a deposit equal to 1,000 times the minimum monthly wage – essentially the lifetime income of a poor person. For the deposit to be returned, a candidate must receive 10 per cent of the vote, and proposals now being debated by Parliament would increase that to 15 per cent. A further barrier to entry is the requirement that a candidate receive 50,000 signatures, of which at least 3 per cent must come from each of the country's eight territories – a provision designed to ensure that a president has adequate support in both the north and the south, whose elites have been at odds in recent years. The relative stability of the rules governing presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan contrasts with the frequent changes made in the parliamentary electoral system. Perhaps the most dramatic have been to the size and structure of the Parliament. Independent Kyrgyzstan inherited from the Soviet era a unicameral Parliament of 350 deputies who had been elected in February 1990 in single-member districts using a two-round voting system. Following constitutional changes made in 1994 by referendum – the president's preferred means of enhancing his powers and reducing those of the Parliament – this unicameral assembly was replaced by a bicameral legislature, with 60 members in the Legislative Assembly and 45 in the Assembly of People's Representatives. In the parliamentary elections of February 1995 and February 2000, the entire Assembly of People's Representatives and 45 members of the Legislative Assembly were elected in 45 single-member districts using two-round voting

The remaining 15 members of the Legislative Assembly were elected by List PR using closed lists

and a single nationwide district with a 5 per cent formal threshold, that is, parties must secure at least 5 per cent of the total vote nationwide to be represented in the Parliament. For the 15 PR seats, each party had the right to put forward a list of 30 persons, and in cases where candidates from the list also stood in single-member districts and won, their names were removed from the party list[2.148].

The reduction of the number of deputies from 350 to 105, ostensibly designed as a cost-saving measure, facilitated presidential control of the Parliament by trebling the size of the single-member districts and thus reducing the ability of smaller parties to win seats. The presence of a handful of List PR seats in the new Parliament did little to compensate for the disadvantages that a diminutive Parliament posed for small parties. Moreover, the post-communist elections have returned parliaments whose composition differed dramatically from that of the rubber-stamp Soviet legislatures. Communist Party control of candidate nomination had worked in such a way as to create bodies in which those who had passed the approval process comprised a broad cross-section of society. In contrast, the post-communist assemblies in Kyrgyzstan were almost exclusively male and had a disproportionate number of executive officials and the newly rich [3].

According to the author of the article, despite the fact that the presidential election is a week away, Kazakhstan is still in power. According to President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan is a paradise. But analysts say there is no competition or political debate in the election. "Luca Aneschi, a Central Asia researcher at the University of Glasgow, told The Diplomat that the reason why so little is being said about the election is that it is out of the question. The fact that early elections are scheduled for April 26 did not surprise anyone. Mr. Nazarbayev also called for early elections in 2011, 2005 and 1999. The Constitution of Kazakhstan stipulates that the term of office of a person should not exceed two terms. In 2007, the presidential term was reduced from 7 to 5 years. In 2007, the constitution was amended to remove any restrictions on Mr. Nazarbayev. This was tantamount to his declaration as "President for life." Such constitutional "processes" are very common in Central Asia, especially in Uzbekistan. This year's election campaign in Kazakhstan officially began on March 26. According to the law, the campaign must last 30 days and end two days before the election. 2021 began with elections for Central Asian states. In Kyrgyzstan, the people voted for the president, and in Kazakhstan for the parliament. Commentators say the election, which

ended in a victory for the ruling party, is also a signal to the Uzbek public. According to preliminary data, presidential candidate SadyrJaparov received about 80 percent of the vote in Kyrgyzstan, while Nur Otan, Kazakhstan's ruling Nur Otan party, received more than 70 percent of the vote. Kyrgyzstanis also voted in favor of the presidency in a referendum. In Kyrgyzstan, SadyrJaparov will be the first president to be empowered. Japarov, who came to power after the overthrow of former President Jeenbekov, began his career with constitutional changes, raising concerns that the "democratic island" in Central Asia could be lost.



Kazakhstan's election results have confirmed earlier predictions that parliamentary control will remain with the Nur Otan party, led by President Nursultan Nazarbayev. According to the OSCE mission, which made its initial findings on the election, the election was non-competitive. According to Christian Vigenin, who heads the organization's short-term observer mission, freedom of speech, the right to hold demonstrations and rallies, and the registration of political parties remain problematic in Kazakhstan. Yaroslav Domansky, the head of the OSCE parliamentary election mission in Kazakhstan, said the election was limited. "No political party has been registered in Kazakhstan since 2013. As a result, only previously registered political parties were eligible to vote. In addition, all parties running in the elections support the policies of the President and the party line in the government. It limits the political choice of citizens".

In early 2021, Kyrgyzstan also held presidential elections and a referendum. Elections in Kazakhstan were held without the participation of the opposition, with some parties boycotting the elections and others failing to register as political parties. Opposition supporters and protesters who marched across the country on election day were arrested, detained, and a group of independent opposition observers was harassed and barred from entering polling stations. The Freedom Wing NGO, which brings together more than 100 independent observers, says the election was unfair. The pandemic has hampered the work of observers under the pretext of providing test

results for the coronavirus. According to preliminary data from the Central Election Commission of Kazakhstan, three of the five parties that participated in the elections have entered parliament. The ruling Nur Otan party won 70 percent of the vote. The Nur Otan party, founded by Nazarbayev, has not been given the status of a "ruling party" for decades. Two years ago, Kasim-Jomart Tokayev's candidate was also nominated for the presidency by the party, which is also chaired by Nazaboyevhimself, and he won the election with a landslide victory. Commentator Namaz Normomin noted that the elections in the region were held without competition, noting that the public's reaction to the results is intensifying. "Kazakhstan is concerned not with the results of the last election, but with the growing activism of the Kazakh public," he said. Kazakhs have been protesting the election, the outcome of which has already been announced. Well, regardless of whether the government suppresses these protests, I think the Kazakh public will become more active in this oil. This is also important for Uzbekistan, where presidential elections are expected. How fair the election will be depends on public activism. In Kyrgyzstan, too, there was no equal opportunity for candidates, and Japarov used government resources at his own expense. In addition, turnout is very low at around 40 percent. This is also an indicator of public mood. There are now speculations that Japarov will strengthen autocracy, but the situation in Kyrgyzstan is likely to change very quickly. So while a referendum is scheduled for this country in the spring, things could be reversed. In general, elections in Central Asia seem to depend not only on governments, but also on the public itself" said commentator Namaz Normomin. Elections will be held in 2021 in two other Central Asian countries – Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Elections are scheduled for the presidency in Uzbekistan and for the formation of a bicameral parliament in Turkmenistan. Kyrgyzstan has called snap parliamentary elections following a spring referendum. As you can see, the election process in Central Asia is not very legitimate.



The practice of political parties nominating worthy candidates for the presidency has not yet been perfected. The current electorate does not yet have the

desire to run for the presidency and the competitive candidates who can truly become the head of state. The influence of political parties in the country will only become known three or two months before the election. A truly competitive political electorate has not been formed in Uzbekistan for 30 years. The situation in other Central Asian countries remains the same.

In an interview with The Astana Times, Tatiana Okhlopkova, a spokeswoman for the Central Election Commission, said she was taking the issue of voter rights very seriously. But Luca Aneschi of the University of Glasgow disagrees. "The whole election process is very rigid," he said. "Opposition candidates have been carefully selected, and one of them doesn't even want to campaign. Of course, Nursultan Nazarbayev is at the center of any media coverage of the election.

In fact, you rarely see election-related articles in the press. When the Astana Times looked at the front page on April 21, there was no mention of the election.



Tengrinews' English-language publication, which is expected to get 70 percent of the vote, has been lightly critical of the election law, including Mr. Nazarbayev's remarks. The Russian-language version of the publication has a section on elections, but does not mention any candidate other than Nazarbayev. Luca Aneschi says Nazarbayev's reelection is a way to demonstrate a "democratic form." Analysts have called democracy in Central Asia "controlled democracy," and rightly so. The region is "interpreting" the election process on its own, and it is unlikely that Sunday's presidential election will be any different.

At the same time, Afghanistan is part of a larger Central Asian contingent, where the electoral process affects security and stability in the region. The country has held presidential and parliamentary elections for the first time since 2001. There have been four presidential elections to date, in which two candidates have been elected twice. The events of recent years could disrupt the electoral system that has been in place in Afghanistan for years.

Presidential elections were held in Afghanistan on October 9, 2004. Hamid Karzai won the elections with 55.4% of the vote and three times more votes than any other candidate. Twelve candidates received less than 1% of the vote. It is estimated that more than three-quarters of Afghanistan's nearly 12 million

registered voters cast ballots. The elections were overseen by the Joint Electoral Management Body, chaired by Zakim Shah and vice-chaired by Ray Kennedy, an American working for the United Nations [4].

After some accusations of fraud circulated on the day of the election, at least fifteen candidates declared that they were boycotting the ballot, but the boycott dissolved when the United Nations announced it would set up a three-person independent panel to investigate the charges of irregularities. The panel included a former Canadian diplomat, a Swedish electoral expert, and the third member was later named by the European Union.

		
Nominee	Hamid Karzai	Yunus Qonuniy
Party	Independent	Naveen
Running mate	Karim Khalili	
Popular vote	4,443,029	1,306,503
Percentage	55.37%	16.28%

The date was originally set for July 5, 2004. The elections were twice postponed, first until September, and then until October. Candidates for president also nominated two vice-presidential candidates. Some candidates used this to balance their ticket with regard to Afghanistan's three main ethnic communities. If no candidate had secured 50% of the votes, a run-off election would have been held [5].

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