

THE 2007 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN: RESULTS AND PROSPECTS

This article focuses on the political reform ongoing in Kazakhstan and the elections which took place in August 2007. The authors argue that democratization and positive change is underway and the failure of the opposition parties in the recent elections was largely a result of their lack of progressive ideas and emphasis on merely attacking authorities. The authors conclude that, unlike many observers from abroad think, Kazakhstan will benefit most from the stability that the current single party government offers and, based on the maturation of the opposition parties, will develop a more solid multi-party governance in due time.

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This political season will definitely occupy a special place in the contemporary history of Kazakhstan. It would be no exaggeration to note that the political reform now underway has significantly changed the political field and the alignment of forces in the country. This process started with the amendments made to the country's constitution in May 2007 which aim to bring equality to economic and political development in Kazakhstan. The main pillar of these amendments is the adoption of a form of presidential-parliamentary rule in Kazakhstan. The deliberate transfer of some presidential powers to political parties and parliament is not just a sign of the constructive development of the political system, but also a strategically well-articulated step that has accelerated the process of political modernization in Kazakhstan.

A change in the status and powers of parliament led to the dissolution of the lower chamber and a call for an early election to the Mazhilis on 18 August, 2007. Analysts suggested various reasons for confining the previous parliament to history. However, it seems that this step was quite logical because it was prompted by the constitutional amendments, and, in turn, by the demands of the time. There were no other clear reasons for dissolving parliament, because there was no criticism of the activities of the previous Mazhilis in the country or society and the chamber was working quite efficiently. This step was compatible with Kazakhstan's democratic development and the requirements for the rapid modernization of our country.

A general election on a proportional basis was not only an innovation in the history of Kazakhstan but also, for all political forces and for society as a whole, a test of the maturity of the multi-party system. Very few people had any understanding of the required tactics for a political party in this new situation and the relations which it needed to build with the local and central authorities. For the first time, a party had to compile a list of candidates and presented them to the voters as a collective image of the party. Studies of public opinion took on a totally different form, while the battle for the ratings of the various parties at the national level turned into one of the most intriguing aspects of the recent election campaign.

Well before the start of the campaign, many experts branded it "an election with no suspense"—in other words, with a clear favorite and predictable results. In fact, the results of the election astonished everyone and caused a great deal of controversy. Out of all this controversy and the quite unexpected nature of the election results, Kazakhstan has embarked on an important long-term process of political reform. In reality the country has switched from one system to another, from the former Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic and its post-Soviet version, based on unclear legitimacy, to a functioning nation state. The recent election campaign was indeed the logical consequence of this reform. The authorities broadcast another clear signal to the Kazakh people about their firm intention to democratize the country and an assurance that the process of political modernization would not be scaled down or mothballed.

The parliamentary election was preceded by a certain process of mergers and transformations among the country's political parties. It was, after all, a multi-party contest. In total, seven political parties took part in the 2007 election: the National Social Democratic Party (OSDP), the Nur Otan people's Democratic Party, the Party of Patriots of Kazakhstan (PPK), the Auyl Social Democratic Party, the Ak Zhol Democratic Party, the Rukhaniyat Party and the Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan (CPPK).

The favorite was the Nur Otan people's democratic party, which presented itself as the ruling party. The nucleus of its program was support for the president's political and economic program. The second favorite was the National Social Democratic Party (OSDP), which had earlier been joined by the opposition Nagyz Ak Zhol party.

OSDP positioned itself as the main opponent of Nur Otan and the government in general, aiming to change fundamentally the country's political and socioeconomic policy and dismantle the existing system of state governance. Among the leaders of the race was Ak Zhol, which was joined by the Adilet democratic party. Ak Zhol represented the so-called moderate opposition and adhered to a constructive line, proposing its own vision of changing the country's development policy.

The Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan, the Party of Patriots of Kazakhstan (PPK), Auyl and Rukhaniyat were all regarded as outsiders. Their popularity ratings in society were not high and their activities were ineffectual and scarcely noticed. For this reason experts did not consider these parties as potential winners.

The specific feature of the proportional election system is its focus not on certain personalities but on the competition of ideas and proposals, i.e. the election platforms. In the election campaign, the forerunners, in terms of the election platforms ratings, were Nur Otan, Ak Zhol and OSDP. The platforms of the Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan, the Party of Patriots of Kazakhstan (PPK), Auyl and Rukhaniyat were very weak. In order to receive a majority of votes a party platform should, above all, meet the interests of the electorate and cover all the crucial and acute problems faced by the public.

In terms of comprehensiveness and coverage of topical issues, the election platforms of Nur Otan, Ak Zhol and OSDP were the most successful. For example, the platforms of Auyl, Rukhaniyat, PPK and CPPK focused only on certain problems. At the same time, CPPK and PPK did not come up with a comprehensive approach to explain the main provisions of their programs. Another serious shortcoming of these parties was the lack of original ideas and proposals which could generate the electorate's interest.

Of course, we cannot ignore the fact that the election was early and there was little time to prepare for it, but it did demonstrate which parties were functioning in reality and which ones simply lived "from election to election."

This campaign also displayed some other pronounced features: firstly, for the first time in the political history of Kazakhstan, a parliamentary election was held on party tickets, and secondly, members of the Assembly of Kazakhstan's People were delegated to the country's elected body. At the same time, along with the parliamentary election, there was an election to local representative bodies—the maslikhats—which went virtually unnoticed in the heat of the inter-party fight.¹

The actual foundations of power are undergoing transformation in Kazakhstan now and parties are becoming key players in the political process. In this respect changing the election system has significant importance—a switch to electing members of the Mazhilis on a proportional basis. This has boosted the activities of political parties, which until now, in essence, were not involved in the real process of adopting political decisions. On the other hand, the change has imposed a requirement that the parties must revise their key policies and priorities, many of them were very “vague”, lacking definition and offering no real alternatives to the government course of reforms. In any case, there will be more qualitative shifts to join the party and political field. The formation of a system of political parties with clear ideologies and specific social bases has yet to be completed in Kazakhstan.²

Another specific point worth noting is that this is a Kazakh “innovation” which has no precedent in world political practice. The innovation is that the Assembly acquired a constitutional status and the right to be represented in parliament. The Assembly, set up twelve years ago as an advisory body to harmonize interethnic relations, has become a fully-fledged institution of the political system.

It is important to stress that the 2007 election was held in a peaceful manner, without any excesses or political unrest. This means that the authorities ensured equal rights and all the necessary conditions for a fair and open competition. In the course of the election campaign all participants in the election process conducted their activities within the bounds of legality and on the basis of mutual respect and objectivity. It is worth noting that a certain illusion was created whereby the radical opposition was also seen to get involved in a civilized political fight.

And, of course, Kazakh citizens became politically more mature, more competent and more selective in their preferences. The Kazakh society proved itself to be immune to radical ideas. The factor of so-called conservatism, which is present in virtually all countries with successful economies, played a role. Psychologically, people do not want drastic changes which may create instability. Under these conditions the opposition parties were led to give up their previous practice of voicing extreme opinions and totally negative criticism. As a result, radical scenarios that were suggested for the development of the election process fell completely flat.

¹ M. Abisheva. “No more stakes!” in *Elections-2007 – new stage in the development of political system of the Republic of Kazakhstan* (Almaty: KazISS, 2007), p. 158.

² M. Abisheva. Prospects of the development of the party system of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the light of the Constitutional reform. *Constitutional reform – new stage in the development of Kazakhstan: “Round Table” Proceedings (22 May 2007)* (Almaty: KazISS, 2007), p. 32.

In addition, this election campaign was distinguished by unprecedented access to the media and a wide range of facilities and resources offered to all parties to conduct their campaigns. In order to ensure equal access to the media for political parties and better to inform the voters about their election platforms, a format of open political debates was introduced as widely as possible. During the campaigning, all parties could buy space in leading national newspapers and on television and radio stations without hindrance. TV debates and various Internet conferences between leaders of all political parties were also organized. Incidentally, the use of various forms of Internet communications for campaigning was also another novelty for Kazakhstan. Indeed, this was a great breakthrough towards democratization compared with previous elections. From the point of view of the functional parameters of the election system, the nature of coverage of the election campaign in the country was rendered as close as possible to internationally recognized standards of election law.³

The results of media monitoring to establish the frequency of references to the political parties in the election campaign showed that the number of references to one party or another depended directly on the activity of the parties themselves. The conclusion based on the results of this monitoring is clear-cut: no party was deprived of media attention. The parties which received the most coverage in the media were Nur Otan, Ak Zhol and OSDP. However, this does not mean that the media discriminated in favor for these parties; it is simply that this troika held the highest number of image-building and campaigning events.

Society's reaction to the parties' election campaigns was quite calm. The popular mood, reserved and sensible, possibly had the effect of cutting down the level of “black PR” and flows of political dirty tricks in the media to a minimum. Even though there were individual cases, they should be regarded as attempts by certain players to attract the public's attention to themselves to enliven the election campaign. In general, lively discussions, battles of ideas, disputes and polemics between parties and the electorate were held in the virtual space of popular websites, not on the streets. One important conclusion can be drawn right now: the new (proportional) system of electing the Mazhilis has significantly enhanced the culture of public debate and the responsibility of party leaders.

As a result, 377 candidates from the seven parties contested 98 seats in the lower chamber of parliament and a further nine candidate were put forward by the Assembly of Kazakhstan's People, who were elected separately.

At 0700 local time on 18 August 2007, 9,728 polling stations opened in all the country's regions, of which 1,512 stations had the Saylau electronic voting system. By 2100, all polling stations had completed the voting. At 2200 Astana time, the final information about the turnout in the election to the Mazhilis and elections to the maslikhats at all levels was received: 5,726,544 people, or 64.56 percent of the total electorate, had exercised their right to vote.

³ M. Abisheva. Competition, opened for participation in *Elections-2007 – new stage in the development of political system of the Republic of Kazakhstan* (Almaty: KazISS, 2007), p. 130.

Distribution of votes⁴

No	Political party	Votes received, %
1.	The National Social Democratic Party (OSDP)	4.54
2.	The Nur Otan People's Democratic Party	88.41
3.	The Party Of Patriots Of Kazakhstan (PPK)	0.78
4.	The Auyl Social Democratic Party	1.51
5.	The Ak Zhol Democratic Party	3.09
6.	The Rukhaniyat Party	0.37
7.	The Communist People's Party Of Kazakhstan (CPPK)	1.29

The election results shattered all the political analysts' predictions: only one party — Nur Otan — is to be represented in the new Mazhilis. The other six parties failed to clear the 7-percent threshold. In the run up to the election, both in Kazakhstan and abroad, the victory of the ruling party was never in doubt, but the fact that there would be no other elected representatives, in second or even third place, was a total surprise for everyone. No-one expected this result — neither the government and the opposition, nor the experts and the observers.⁵

The winners of the election were clear a few weeks before the vote. According to all opinion polls, the greatest level of support amongst the people was for Nur Otan. The main element of suspense was about which parties would manage to get the necessary 7 percent to be in the Mazhilis. Experts predicted that Nur Otan would get up to 80 percent of the seats and that at least two opposition parties would be represented in parliament. It was expected that these parties would be Ak Zhol and OSDP, which could diversify the political process in the country. However, these predictions did not realize.

In addition to the unexpected results of the votes, experts were also not expecting this unprecedented level of turnout among Kazakh voters. This has been interpreted to demonstrate the desire of the country's citizens to be involved in the process of transformation that has been taking place in the country.⁶ A total of 8,891,561 citizens were included on the voters' lists, of whom 6,082,430, or 68.4 percent, took part in the vote. A total of 185,979 people voted by post. According to the Central Electoral Commission, the highest turnout was in Almaty Oblast (90.12 percent) and North Kazakhstan Oblast (75.03 percent). The lowest turnout was in the country's two main cities — Astana and Almaty. In general, the turnout for this election was higher than in previous elections: 56.8 percent of voters took part in the election to the Mazhilis in 2004 and 56.4 percent in the 2003 election

⁴ Information from the Kazakh Central Electoral Commission (www.election.kz)

⁵ M. Abisheva. "Triumph of the "Nur Otan" was predictable", *RIA Novosti*, www.rian.ru, 19.08.2007

⁶ M. Abisheva. "No more stakes!" in *Elections-2007 – new stage in the development of political system of the Republic of Kazakhstan* (Almaty: KazISS, 2007), p. 158.

to the maslikhats.⁷ The main reasons for the high activity of the electorate can be attributed to a number of factors:

Firstly, the powerful information campaign that accompanied the election. This election campaign, both technologically and emotionally, significantly outpaced the parliamentary election in 2004. Moreover, the country's Central Electoral Commission, for its part, took a number of systematic steps to enable the political parties to project their election platforms to their voters.⁸

Secondly, the numerous appeals to voters made by the political parties, which needed every possible vote in order to clear the 7 percent threshold. This is another advantage of the proportional system. In the past the fate of parliamentary seats was decided in constituencies, where due to specific local conditions, candidates were not always interested in the activity of voters, whereas now for many participants in the election a high turnout becomes a defining factor for their success.

And, thirdly, the serious interest the parliamentary election received from NGOs, which aimed to attract as many people as possible to take part in the election. The large-scale Your Vote — Your Future action and numerous events for young people naturally had an important role in this respect, giving powerful impetus to developing civil society in Kazakhstan. The result was active cooperation between NGOs and political parties. Thus, the election acted as a means to increase the civil responsibility and political culture of the people, assisting the development of their independence and involvement, a very important factor for the dynamic growth of society and the state.

The election of members of the Mazhilis from the Assembly of Kazakhstan's People was held on August 20. The list of voters included 364 people who are members of the Council of the Assembly of Kazakhstan's People, of whom 337 people or 92.58 percent took part in the vote. Nine candidates stood in the election to the Mazhilis — representatives of ethnic Germans, ethnic Ukrainians, ethnic Russians, ethnic Byelorussians, ethnic Kazakhs, ethnic Uzbeks, ethnic Bulgarians, ethnic Koreans and Uighurs.⁹

According to the plan, MPs elected by the Assembly were expected to become "envoys of friendship", whose work would aim to further improve state policy, taking into account the interests of Kazakhstan's people. It is worth noting that this practice is unique, which is why it is too early to talk about its efficiency and to predict its future. The idea of ethnic representation in parliament aims to develop the Kazakh model of interethnic and inter-denominational peace and accord in the country.

⁷ Information from the Kazakh Central Electoral Commission (www.election.kz)

⁸ M. Abisheva. Competition, opened for participation in Elections-2007 – new stage in the development of political system of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Almaty: KazISS, 2007), p. 130.

⁹ According to the Kazakh Central Electoral Commission (www.election.kz)

The election campaign was monitored by an unprecedented number of observers sent by international organizations and foreign countries. The total number of accredited international observers stood at 1,129 people. The mission of CIS observers was made up of 448 observers from six countries. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization sent 13 observers; 137 observers from seven foreign countries were also accredited and 71 observers from international organizations monitored the vote.¹⁰ The OSCE/ODIHR mission included 460 observers from 28 OSCE member countries. The OSCE appointed Canadian Senator Consilio Di Nino its special coordinator and the head of the OSCE short-term mission to observe the election in Kazakhstan, which all points to an increased interest in Kazakhstan.

Observers noted that the struggle between the political parties was conducted correctly, equal access to the media was provided to the parties and that a calm political situation prevailed in the country. They reported a positive assessment of the measures taken by the authorities to ensure equal conditions for election campaigning for all political parties. For example, observers stated, all measures had been taken to enforce the rules for a fairer and freer election. The current political changes were a step in the right direction, observers concluded.¹¹

In general, such an unexpected result of the election race was due to a combination of a number of factors. The most important factor in Nur Otan's victory is, of course, the personality of its leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev, whose image was identified with that of the party. This was the main reason why the election results mirrored those of the 2005 presidential election.¹² The party differed from other parties in having a well-developed and broad ideological base. Its position could be described as reformist, offering voters the preservation of all the successes achieved over the years of independence together with the determination to push ahead with a policy of all-round reforms. Nur Otan's election campaign focused on positive dimensions such as the growth of people's prosperity. The election results thus demonstrate the optimism of the electorate.

Regardless of experts' predictions that either the moderate opposition Ak Zhol party or a team of well-known Kazakh opposition members united as OSDP would get into the lower chamber was not correct; both failed to clear the 7 percent threshold. It was quite logical to assume that those already holding power would prepare for the election in advance, but it was very hard to believe that the opposition would be so unprepared. One can find many excuses such as the limited period of the election race. However it is clear that the Kazakh opposition in fact failed the test of parliamentary elections. In the 2005 parliamentary elections the opposition had obtained far better results. However, the opposition forces were less than convincing this time. The "conflict image" of the opposition leaders again played against them: by raising certain problems they were simply

¹⁰ According to the Kazakh Central Electoral Commission (www.election.kz)

¹¹ US Politicians about the Election in Kazakhstan. Material provided by the Khabar TV channel on August 15, 2007.

¹² M. Abisheva. "Triumph of the "Nur Otan" was predictable", *RIA Novosti*, www.rian.ru, 19.08.2007.

staking their bets on negative points. The opposition's fundamental mistake is that even when it unites (into the OSDP) it does so not on a constructive but on a destructive platform, not for "yes" but "against". It was not wise either for radicals from the OSDP to proclaim their union as a means of fighting the current authorities and head of state when every opinion poll showed that society supported President Nursultan Nazarbayev's policies. By doing so, the opposition set itself against the majority of the electorate.

Another weakness is that the opposition focused its efforts not on developing its plan of action and bringing its content to the people but on searching for shortcomings in the organization of the election and uncovering plots by the authorities against the opposition. The defeat in this parliamentary election should teach a lesson to all Kazakh parties that the voters' trust can only be won as a result of constant and systematic work and that the election is just the final stage of this work. The opposition spent most of its time on certain intrigues, instead of on working with the electorate. This resulted in detracting from the image of certain political figures and parties. Many political analysts noted that disunity is the greatest weakness of the Kazakh radical opposition- that is why it has neither unconditional unity nor progressive programs. Because of their inability to reach a common position, the disunited power-seeking opposition members are distracted into concluding all kinds of unnatural unions between themselves.

It will not be a successful tactics for the opposition parties to spend the next five years criticizing and fighting against the authorities, rather than "analyzing and correcting mistakes" and building strong bonds with the electorate. Ak Zhol and OSDP should now revise their party activities, and draft a competitive program of action. The election uncovered all the weaknesses and mistakes of these parties and it is high time now that they started to work not "from election to election" but on a constant, professional basis. Otherwise, the electorate, whose political culture and socioeconomic priorities are constantly growing and changing, will not support the opposition in the next election, scheduled for 2012, either. The electoral test in 2007 showed that the opposition had not managed to understand the trends of development of the modern political process in Kazakhstan and skillfully use new opportunities in its favor.

As we have noted, the election attracted controversial assessments—it was organized openly and yet its result surprised everyone, including the authorities, the society and international experts. Foreign experts immediately said the election results diverged from the authorities' declared aim to make the political system more open through constitutional reforms held earlier this year. Foreign media outlets picked up this debate, we believe, without a clear understanding of the point of the issue and the peculiarities of the political process in Kazakhstan. Moreover, Kazakh society itself was in favor of undergoing transformations, and isn't it precisely this that is needed in a democratic society? That is why the media noise around the election results caused only bewilderment and distrust in the minds of critically-inclined foreign experts.

Certainly, the formation of the Mazhilis on the basis of only one party creates certain challenges. The main one affecting the work of the lower chamber is that this situation could lead to the monopolization of opinion and ideology by Nur Otan. In order to prevent this, the head of state called for involving parties which had been left outside parliament in the political process. This process of involving them in discussing and adopting decisions relating to the state's development has already started.

The Mazhilis will now need to prove that its one-party composition is by no means a step backwards in the course of democratizing and further developing Kazakhstan.

The Mazhilis can play the main role in Nur Otan's cooperation with other parties in developing nation-building. It can create a mechanism to carry out Nur Otan's lawmaking work jointly with other parties. As a result, through jointly drafted laws at all levels, both the representative and the other branches of power will reflect the pluralism of views and ideologies of society. Thus, the account of all these new political conditions will make it possible to organize coordinated and efficient work by the Mazhilis, which, in turn, will have a positive impact on the development of the state and society.

The one-party parliament does not mean that multi-party democratic practices have suffered a setback. We believe that the requirements of improving political party functioning in the medium term have now been defined clearly. These parties cannot be established in a day, but a modern strong competitive democratic country needs reliable parties that work with voters effectively. This is in the interests not only of the parties themselves but also of the state and society in general.

As a result of the successes of Nur Otan in developing Kazakhstan, there is practically no alternative to this party in the country. In this sense, Kazakhstan's party and political system in the near future will most likely be a kind of one-and-a-half-party state, which means that Nur Otan will have a dominant position and the other parties' roles will be secondary.

Is this good or bad? The experience of Japan, Sweden, South Korea and some other countries shows that a one-and-a-half-party system creates political stability in the country and ensures sustainable economic growth over a certain period of time. The one-and-a-half-party system demonstrates the highest level of efficiency in transitional periods of development, when the country faces large-scale, strategic tasks that demand the consolidation of political forces to carry out radical reforms.

In sum, the party and political alignment in Kazakhstan will ensure stability in our country.



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