On April 3, 2011 presidential elections were held in the Central Asian republic of Kazakhstan and the voters elected the incumbent president Nursultan Nazarbayev with an overwhelming majority of 96%. The incumbent’s landslide victory came in stark contrast with miniscule support demonstrated for the three challengers. The result did not surprise anyone, however – Mr. Nazarbayev enjoys genuine popularity in a fast growing resource-rich post Soviet nation and is perceived by many as a personal guarantor of stability and prosperity in the country. Alongside Uzbekistan’s Islam Karimov, Nazarbayev is the longest serving head of state in Central Asia.

OSCE praised elections for high technical competence but noted many irregularities, concluding that elections fell short of expectations. Absence of real contestation was the central concern of observers, with the opposition boycotting elections, while official election rivals did not challenge incumbent's policies or personality. One of the candidates even admitted that he and his family voted for Nazarbayev.

Whatever the purpose of this seemingly well-staged overture might have been, the result is that Nursultan Nazarbayev is to stay for another five-year term and is not yet willing to leave politics. He already enjoys vast privileges that put him far above an ordinary civil servant. In 2007 the parliament dominated by his Nur-Otan party removed term limits for him and in 2010 granted him the constitutional status of "elbasy" (leader of the nation), endowing the first president with a wide array of patriarchal powers and immunities.

President’s Electoral History

Nazarbayev first came to power in 1989, becoming Secretary of the Communist Party of Soviet Kazakhstan. In 1991, in the first elections in independent Kazakhstan he ran unopposed and won 98% approval. In 1995 presidential term was extended till 2000 in a referendum with 96% of approval. In 1999 Nazarbayev ran for a second term and won with 81%, while his main challenger, ex-Premier Akezhan Kazhegeldin, was disqualified for attending an unsanctioned protest. The US Government and OSCE criticized the poll. In 2005 Nazarbayev won 91% of votes, against single-digit approval for the nearest opponent in an election.

April 2011 elections in Kazakhstan have reinstated the long-running strongman Nursultan Nazarbayev in power. Nazarbayev enjoys genuine popularity in the country with a resource-rich economy, political and social stability and inter-ethnic peace. However, due to weak political institutions and intra-elite struggle Kazakhstan might undergo a potentially destabilizing succession period if the 70-year old President becomes unable to rule the country. To address the reasonable concerns of international investors and the local polity, Nazarbayev will have to solve the succession issue in the nearest future. So far he has not made any visible moves to appoint a successor and address succession concerns and has not even made clear if he would run again in the next elections.

(*) The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

marred by “a number of significant shortcomings”, e.g. intimidation and media bias3.

In 2007, the Parliament passed a controversial law granting the first president of Kazakhstan an exemption from term limits, putting him only a step away from becoming a president for life. Such exemption was only made in favor of Nazarbayev as a recognition of his outstanding service to the nation. Next presidents were to be limited to two five-year terms. Opposition cried foul but the international community did not take a strongly opposing stance on the issue.

In December 2010, while Kazakhstan was still chairing OSCE, the parliament voted unanimously to allow Nazarbayev to stay in office until 2020 bypassing two elections. The President vetoed the bill. The Parliament that usually never counters president’s will unanimously overturned the veto and authorized citizens to collect the necessary 200,000 signatures to initiate a referendum. Activists collected almost five million signatures (representing more than half of the electorate) in about three weeks and demanded that their leader stay in power. The President in turn forwarded the case to Constitutional Court for evaluation. Constitutional Court opposed the initiative not on substantive, but technical grounds, citing minor errors of the process. Allegedly trying to mediate between the will of the people and his own veto, the President took a middle ground – snap elections in April 2011. Early elections stripped opposition of an opportunity for a meaningful campaign and any significant tactical move. In a countermove, the opposition called a boycott on the elections.

After a call for public non-participation in the elections, voter turnout became the only intriguing and contentious issue. With Nazarbayev’s entourage positioning him as exceptionally popular candidate with almost universal backing, a low turnout would have been embarrassing. Therefore, the incumbent camp mobilized state resources to boost turnout. According to available anecdotal evidence and OSCE preliminary report, voters employed at public organizations were sometimes strongly compelled to vote4. A Moscow-based news website even published two internal documents detailing orders and instructions by public employers to show up at elections5. As a result, registered turnout was the impressive 90%6.

Factors Adding to Nazarbayev’s Popularity

President Nazarbayev is genuinely popular among the majority of Kazakhstani citizens, despite his latest authoritarian tendencies. The latest survey shows that 91% of citizens approve of the President7, while not as happy with the government. Besides the absence of visible successors of the same political weight and charisma, several other conditions contributed to strong support for Nazarbayev.

One such condition is the economy that grew about 9% each year starting 2000. Global financial crisis slowed down the growth to 1.2% in 2009, but the country seems to be gradually regaining pre-crisis growth rates. Gross domestic output grew 7% in 2010 and is expected to grow 4-6% this year8.

Second is Kazakh Chairmanship at OSCE, an asset skillfully inflated by President’s communication team. The most important event of Kazakh chairmanship was OSCE Astana Summit, a high level meeting that took place after an 11-year interruption. Even though only a limited number of initial objectives have been achieved, holding of a summit was important as a symbolic event, especially for Kazakhstanis. Yermukhamet Yertysbaev, presidential adviser, for example, proclaimed that «when Astana became literally capital of the world and Nursultan Nazarbayev, even if for two days, politician number one in the world, all Kazakhstanis, the whole of Kazakhstan’s multinational people felt pride and patriotism for their country and for their leader»9.

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Finally, a political and humanitarian crisis in neighboring Kyrgyzstan added to Nazarbayev’s popularity. April 2010 uprising in Kyrgyzstan resulted in the overthrow of second president, 73 deaths, 2000 wounded and $20 million damage\textsuperscript{40}. The resulting Kyrgyz-Uzbek clashes in the south in June 2010 left between 400 and 2000 dead and 400 000 displaced\textsuperscript{15}, with southern regions falling out of central government’s de facto jurisdiction.

The initial democratic nature of the uprising led to democracy and popular politics being association with political instability and inter-ethnic tensions in Central Asia. Kazakh president has drawn implicit parallels between stability in Kazakhstan that he was upholding and troubles in Kyrgyzstan at his speech to the XVI Assembly of Peoples of Kyrgyzstan in October 2010\textsuperscript{1213}.

**Interest Groups in Kazakh Politics**

Elections and public debates are only a visible tip of Kazakh political iceberg. The more fundamental developments that move the political process are driven by the struggle of various interest groups. The president is perceived as a broker balancing between the rising and falling power of different politico-economic groups. There is no broad consensus on how to conceptualize such groups. One way, which was more popular in the nineties and is still a predominant conceptualization in the academic discourse, is alongside sub-ethnic lines (tribes, clans, etc.). The other, more popular with Kazakh political scientists and most of the Russian observers is one based on “groupings,” more or less stable alliances of president’s closest relatives and allies and big business, media and law enforcement structures.

Those observers who conceptualize Kazakh interest group politics alongside sub-ethnic identities usually refer to the *zhus*\textsuperscript{14} (conglomerates of Kazakh tribes) or clans. There are three zhus in Kazakhstan: the Senior, the Middle and the Junior. The President comes from the Senior zhus and observers note that today Senior zhus predominates the political establishment, with Junior zhus members also present as allies. Representatives of Middle zhus were dominating under the Soviet rule and are today represented in technocratic circles and are the majority of urbanized Kazakhs\textsuperscript{15}. However, the concept of zhus by itself cannot explain much: the conglomerates are large, with many competing factions inside, and sometimes in decision making, tribal and zhus affiliations give way to more rational and less primordial considerations\textsuperscript{16}. Attempts to reformulate the zhus conceptualization and include more pragmatic considerations resulted in the “clan” concept. However, while the academic concept of clans is more convincing in cases of Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan, very little evidence is given on clans in Kazakhstan\textsuperscript{17}.

The rivaling conceptualization of the political landscape and more popular among local pundits is groupings around political and economic heavyweights\textsuperscript{18}. Such groupings dispose of considerable revenues (coming from raw resource exploitation or manufacturing high-income goods in state or private firms), powerful allies in state structures, their own banks and media outlets, as well as direct or mediated access to President Nazarbayev.

As of 2010, several such grouping deserve a mention. One is the grouping of Timur Kulibayev, son-in-law of the president and head of a sovereign wealth fund that exerts considerable control over Kazakh economy through shares in state corporations. Previously Kulibayev worked in oil and gas sector and is still considered to “look after” the industry. After the exile of a rival son-in-law Rakhat Aliev, Timur Kulibayev’s is the richest.


\textsuperscript{11} In «The Telegraph», UN reports 400,000 displaced in Kyrgyzstan fighting, June 17, 2010, www.telegraph.co.uk.

\textsuperscript{12} Full text of Nazarbayev’s speech is available in Russian at http://www.zakon.kz/187529-vystuplenie-president-rk-n.-nazarbaeva.html.

\textsuperscript{13} Alex Danilovich refers to the same electoral strategy in Kazakhstan, a Nation of Two Identities: Politics and Revived Tradition, in «Problems of Post-Communism», 57, 1, Jan-Feb, 2010, p. 5.


\textsuperscript{15} Ibidem.


most powerful and ambitious grouping in Kazakh politics. Premier Karim Massimov and most powerful banker Nurzhan Subhanberdin are considered to be protégés of Kulibayev.

Another grouping is the so-called “Eurasianists”, a triumvirate of powerful businessmen of non-Kazakh origins who dominate mineral resource sector in the north. Aleksandr Mashkevich, Pataksh Shodiev and Alizhan Ibragimov own Eurasian Natural Resource Corporation, a London-listed firm with operations throughout the world, as well as Eurasian Bank. Mashkevich is believed to be a close friend and an ally of President Nazarbayev.

Some analysts consider Kazkommertsbank grouping headed by Nurzhan Subhanberdin as more than just a sub-group within Kulibayev’s grouping. Kazkommertsbank is the largest bank in Kazakhstan and is so important that state has supported it with liquidity during financial crisis. Moreover, Subhanberdin is considered to be a widely recognized champion of banking interests and independent business in general.

Two other groupings, headed by state administrators, do not dispose of very large financial resources, like the three mentioned above, but nevertheless deserve attention due to their informal influence and unrestricted access to and trust of the President. Moreover, while Eurasianists and Kazkommertsbank groupings try to stay out of big politics, the following individuals are considered by President Nazarbayev as possible successors due to their experience in state agencies and very close and trustful relationship with the President.

Imangali Tasmagambetov has extensive public management experience as governor of Mangystau region, mayor of Almaty and now of Astana, two most important cities in the country. He also enjoys genuine public popularity. However, Tasmagambetov has many enemies within the ruling circles and many say only his good relations to the President keep him from falling from grace. Tasmagambetov’s support comes from functionaries who worked with him during Soviet times as well as some business representatives.

Nurtai Abykaev, current head of state security, is a leader of another powerful group. He has previously served at top positions as speaker of the Senate, deputy foreign minister and head of presidential administration. Abykaev has worked alongside the President since late eighties and despite occasional “political expulsions” as an ambassador, has not fallen from grace of Nazarbayev. State Security Service (KNB) being a very powerful structure, Abykaev’s reappointment to this post in 2011 should be viewed as expression of President’s trust in this person and his still being a “grey cardinal” of Kazakh politics.

Given such a texture of the Kazakh political landscape, what both common citizens and international investors fear after Nazarbayev’s departure is not mass discontent and bottom-up instability, but more internal clan fighting for the highest seat in the country, which might potentially lead to destabilization of situation in one of the most peaceful countries in the region.

Leader of Nation and His Successor

President Nazarbayev has been quite popular throughout his twenty plus years in power, but is currently enjoying the height of that popularity. Due to government-led public opinion campaign, he is seen by many as the father of the nation, alongside Turkey’s Mustafa Kemal or Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew, often referred to as “First President” or “Elbasy” (leader of the nation). But it was not until recently that his special status has been formalized constitutionally.

On May 15, 2010, Kazakh Parliament granted President Nazarbayev a constitutional title of the Leader of the Nation, with an enormous package of accompanying benefits, e.g. lifetime immunity, security of his and his family’s property and bank accounts, a lifetime seat in the Constitutional Court and Security Council. Moreover, most important policy initiatives will have to be approved by Nazarbayev even after he leaves his office. Finally, insults to the persona or images of Leader of the Nation are prohibited. President refused to sign the document, but did not veto it. In accordance with the Kazakh legislation, the draft became a law without the

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signature one month after, on June 15. Similar guarantees were already granted to Nazarbayev under the Law on First President in 200022.

There was limited discontent by the opposition and a number of neutral public figures, but no mass protests. Many analysts, moreover, welcomed the law as the first sign of Nazarbayev’s preparation to leave the political scene. The scenario seemed to follow Yeltsin-Putin succession scenario in that the President introduces and endorses a successor who would protect his persona and property afterwards. Therefore, it was widely expected that Nazarbayev will not run for the scheduled 2012 elections, opting out for promoting a handpicked successor. Discussions on chances of various individuals to be picked dominated the discourse and any personnel reshuffles were seen as part of an operation successor. The topic is still popular today, even after re-election of Nazarbayev till 2016.

Previously President has vigorously suppressed any person with presidential ambitions. He does not have any son or male relative23 to succeed him and has allegedly kept his immediate family members in check, for example, by undermining his daughter’s political power. Asar party that was the platform for Ms Nazarbayeva’s political engagements was merged with President’s Nur-Otan party, while Khabar TV network controlled by her was brought under state control. The fall from grace of Rakhat Aliev, his former son-in-law and previously the most powerful political figure in the country, is also believed to be due to the latter’s ambitions to succeed the President. Aliev was accused of abduction, while in Vienna and sentenced for 20 years in absentia. Austria granted him political asylum and he is currently out of Kazakhstani politics and hiding in Europe, at least for the time being.

Even though it is too early to talk about a clear successor and despite many rumors circulating, most experts agree on a handful of worthy successors to the first president. One is Timur Kulibayev, president’s very powerful second son-in-law reappointed head of the sovereign wealth fund Samruk-Kazyna controlling about a third of Kazakhstan’s public economy. Kulibayev’s personal fortune is estimated by Forbes to be about $1.3 bln in 201124. He has previously headed Kazakh gas giant KazMunaiGaz and is sitting on the board of biggest state companies. Analysts have previously identified Kulibayev as leading a large and powerful interest group with dominance of oil and gas sector.

Among other shortlisted by analysts is Imangali Tasmagambetov, mayor of Almaty, Nurtai Abykaev, head of State Security Service and Kasym Zhomart Tokayev25, current speaker of the Senate who is next-in-charge should the President be unable to run the country. Karim Massimov, the current prime minister is seen as a strong and loyal supporter of the President, but his accession to the presidency is unlikely because of the suspicion with which allegedly ethnic Uighur and Sinophil Massimov is seen by the majority of the population.

Given that Nazarbayev just won elections that postpone succession issue till 2016, he has enough time and maneuvering space to broker between the existing power players and handpick his successor or introduce someone new, like President Yeltsin did with Vladimir Putin. It’s too early to make any predictions at this point, but whoever he will be, analysts predict a very weak first term presidency for the successor in the shadow of the leader of the nation. To be clear, transferring power to a successor is uncomfortable psychologically and risky politically for Nazarbayev, since he does not have “own blood” to give up the seat for.

22 Additional benefits under the 2010 law include the extension of immunity to his family members, immunity not only for actions as President, but also after retirement as well as additional powers and status of the “Leader of the Nation”, a constitutional recognition of the historical role of Nazarbayev in Kazakh history.

23 He has several nephews and one of them, Kairat Satypaldy is sometimes discussed as a potential heir. However, Satypaldy might be “too religious” for the job, possibly alienating non-Muslims.


Outlook for the Future

To recapture, Kazakhstan is an authoritarian regime ("not free" in Freedom House classification\(^26\)), where President Nazarbayev personally dominates the political sphere with the ruling Nur-Otan party, a motley crew of individuals brought under a single umbrella, holding all seats in the national parliament. Legislature and the judiciary are subservient to the executive and do not possess any autonomy in decision making, a fact once again confirmed by Parliament and Constitutional Court’s inability to uphold ideals of the Constitution and the principle of executive term-limits. Media has been brought under state control and a number of critical journalists have been either jailed or neutralized. Existing opposition parties only register marginal support of the population, while a more or less powerful grassroots opposition movement, Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, has been disbanded in 2005 and its leaders jailed\(^27\).

Income generated from hydrocarbon and mineral resources allows the government to buy off popular dissent, spend heavily on infrastructure, education and social protection, thus somehow limiting opportunities of democratic opposition and prospects for democratization. Simultaneously, availability of financial rents for the competing groupings and their being income-secure prevents life-and-death struggles for resources. All these paint a gloomy picture for possible democratization. Nazarbayev’s leaving office is necessary, but not sufficient for democratization. Given the current political and economic set-up, post-Nazarbayev Kazakhstan will most likely stabilize around something of Russia and Ukraine with limited competitive elections, high levels of corruption, weak media and judiciary.

The political life is dominated by groupings around powerful figures, with vast financial, media and administrative resources. The continued availability of natural resource wealth made some of these groups excessively powerful, a fact that should worry the incumbent President. But the latter has routinely checked against the growing power of different groups, balancing their interests and conflicts. So far the President has been very successful as a broker. However, the risk remains that with President leaving the scene without solving the succession problem, the existing stability and prosperity could quickly turn into uncertainty and stagnation due to informal fighting between various groups in search of power and money, but the likelihood of a large scale political violence is very low. There is a constitutional successor to the President – speaker of the Kazakh parliament, but that post is not yet given to a political heavyweight. Therefore, with the viability of political institutions still depending on health of a single person, Nazarbayev, his vagueness about timing of succession and person of a successor leaves things in limbo.