

A fourth term for Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev?

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In a televised address on 31 January, Kazakhstan's president Nursultan Nazarbayev agreed with the decision by the Constitutional Council, that the initiative by parliament to hold a referendum on extending the president's term of office to 2020, violated the country's constitution. In the same address, the President unexpectedly announced early presidential elections to be held in the coming months. On 2 February, changes in the constitution to bring the elections forward were approved by Parliament, and then by the President. This decision by Nazarbayev, who until recently had tried to appear above the current month-long nationwide campaign to extend his rule, has brought the period of uncertainty regarding his plans to an end. Nazarbayev's participation in the election is synonymous with his winning it, and with a further postponement of the succession question; also, early elections mean less risk of internecine strife within the ruling class.

The Nazarbayev monocracy

Nursultan Nazarbayev has been President of Kazakhstan since 1991. Over the last two decades he has consistently expanded the scope of his powers; in the light of Kazakhstan's palpable economic and political successes, and the lack of any real opposition, this has not given rise to any public expressions of dissent. The 2007 law of the 'first president' allows Nursultan Nazarbayev to stand in presidential elections an unlimited number of times, and his status as 'leader of the nation' (2010) allows him to rule for life – even after his retirement. The parliament of Kazakhstan contains only representatives of the Nur Otan party, which President Nazarbayev leads, so the independence of the legislative authority is effectively nil. Also, the manner in which the members of the Constitutional Council are appointed (three by the President and four by the Parliament which he controls) indicates that its independence is merely formal.

The referendum game

The campaign for a referendum to extend President Nazarbayev's mandate until 2020, which was officially initiated by employees of the university in Oskemen (Ust-Kamenogorsk) on 27 December, has dominated political life in Kazakhstan. Within a few weeks, the petition for the proposed referendum had received not just the required minimum of 200,000 signatures, but as many as 5.5 million – which means that over 50% of all those eligible to vote in Kazakhstan had signed it. At the same time, 'spontaneous' rallies of support were

held throughout the country, and a media campaign enumerated the President's achievements and insisted that he alone is the guarantor of the country's continued stable development. In parallel with the referendum initiative, the Parliament of Kazakhstan played its part; firstly it approved the project at express speed, then the President vetoed the plan, and finally, for the first time in history, the Parliament rejected the President's veto. The referendum project has been strongly criticised by the US, Germany, the EU and the OSCE. Finally, President Nazarbayev appealed to the Constitutional Council, which deemed the project to be in violation of the constitution, while indicating that the President has the right to revoke its decision.

Causes and consequences

Nazarbayev's position does not currently seem to be at risk, so both the referendum campaign and the early elections raise questions about the purpose of these activities. The collection of signatures should be seen as a way of demonstrating public support and the additional legitimacy of the President's authority. Perhaps this was needed because of the likely (although invisible to the public) conflicts inside the ruling class, as it gets ready for the elections planned for the end of 2012. Undoubtedly the President's participation in the elections allows the sensitive question of the succession to be postponed, and cuts short any speculation about his possible successor. At the same time, by vetoing the referendum project and sending it back to the Constitutional Council, the President has once again succeeded in presenting himself in the role of guarantor of the citizens' constitutional rights. Early elections (although they require further amendment to the constitution of Kazakhstan) are easier for foreign opinion to accept, and strongly preferable for Astana with respect to its international image. President Nazarbayev's announcement that he will remain in power is also beneficial from the point of view of foreign investors, because in their eyes, it makes it more likely that this period of stability in Kazakhstan will be extended.