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Kazakhstan's new constitution: preparations for succession and the façade of democratisation

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On 15 March, Kazakhstan's citizens voted in a referendum to adopt a new constitution, with 87% of voters supporting the measure, and official turnout standing at 73%. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev initiated the constitutional reform process in the final months of 2025. Preparations for the entry into force of the new basic law will take three and a half months. On 1 July, the bicameral parliament is to be dissolved, and elections to a new unicameral body will most likely take place in August.

According to the authorities' narrative, the changes aim to transform Kazakhstan's political system from a 'super-presidential' model into a democratic presidential republic with strong checks and balances. In practice, the reform expands the president's powers, including allowing him to appoint state officials to a greater number of positions than previously. It can be seen as a further step towards Tokayev consolidating control over the state and ensuring a smooth transition in the presidency after his term ends in 2029.

Expansion of presidential power

Although Kazakhstan's new constitution provides that the country will remain a presidential republic, the political system will undergo a transformation. The Senate will be abolished, the parliament will be renamed from the Majlis to the Kurultai (Kazakh for 'assembly'), and its membership will expand from 98 to 145 deputies. The shift away from a bicameral legislature is designed to accelerate legislative processes and is also presented in the official narrative as a step towards modernising the political system. A new advisory body is also set to be established – the People's Council (*Halyq Kenesi*). It is intended to safeguard citizens' interests and will consist of an ethnically and religiously diverse group appointed by the president.

Under the new provisions, Kazakhstan's president will gain broader powers to appoint senior state officials. In addition to the authority he already holds to nominate the heads of the Constitutional Court and the National Bank of Kazakhstan among other officials, he will be able to appoint the chairs of the Supreme Court, the Central Election Commission, and the Human Rights Commissioner, as well as judges and members of the Central Election Commission. These changes suggest that the officially emphasised democratisation is largely superficial. The new constitution forms part of a broader consolidation of power in Tokayev's hands, enabling him to place his allies in key positions.

In this context, the most significant change is the reinstatement of the office of vice-president, presented in official messaging as a measure to strengthen pluralism. In practice,

however, this provision further expands Tokayev's power, as the president – with parliament's consent – will appoint his deputy, who will also serve as the formal successor in the event of resignation or death. He is therefore likely to select a closely aligned candidate, best placed to ensure continuity of his policies and preserve his influence within the state.

Low public engagement

Kazakhstan's authorities stated that the process of drafting the new constitution was subject to public consultation. It should be noted, however, that since the document was published in February, both the campaign and consultations were conducted at an accelerated pace. Human rights activists and journalists have also pointed out that critical voices were not accommodated and that the procedure lacked transparency. There is no legal opposition in the country that could openly challenge the system and organise a campaign against the changes. As a result, citizens were exposed in the public sphere almost exclusively to voices supporting the new legislation. Individuals criticising the reform in the press or via social media faced repression and, in some cases, were punished for spreading false information. On the day of the vote, journalists were detained, and there were also reports that international observers were denied access to some polling stations.

Critics of the referendum note that the new provisions introduce a wide range of changes across different elements of the legal and political system, while the vote allowed only a single collective 'yes' or 'no' answer to the question of whether respondents supported amending the constitution. In addition, the authorities restricted the ability to conduct public opinion polling ahead of the referendum. The only entity permitted to carry out a survey was the government-linked Public Opinion Research Institute, which reported that 78% of respondents supported the changes. International organisations engaged in similar work were not granted permission to conduct such research. Local journalists were also affected by this lack of transparency. The government's moves prevented an accurate assessment of genuine public support while creating the impression that the changes were widely accepted. Similar measures were used in 2024 ahead of the referendum on the construction of a nuclear power plant.

Official turnout was unexpectedly high, which, given the low level of public interest in the vote, raises doubts as to whether it may have been inflated. Reports of artificially increasing turnout figures had already reached independent media during the 2024 referendum. This is further suggested by the fact that, in Almaty, the largest city and one known for its politically active population, turnout was only 32.82%. Voters may have boycotted the vote as a form of protest against the authorities, less risky than open opposition, which could entail legal consequences.

Potential succession

Maulen Ashimbayev, the chair of the soon-to-be-dissolved Senate (under the previous constitution, formally first in the line of succession in the event of the president's resignation or death), Deputy Prime Minister Aida Balayeva, and Imangali Tasmagambetov, former Secretary General of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) are among those considered potential candidates for the post of vice-president.

However, Erlan Karin appears to be the most likely candidate for the position of second-in-command. A close adviser to Tokayev, he has worked with the president since he took office in 2019. He has so far served as the country's sole State Counsellor and was also deputy chair of the constitutional reform commission. Under the new basic law, the office of State Counsellor is to be abolished. Until now, it has been one of the key posts in the system, with prerogatives including advising the president on domestic and foreign policy, as well as coordinating social policy and humanitarian aid. It is possible that the newly created office will ultimately assume similar competences. The vice-president will also be first in the formal line of succession, which suggests that the post-holder may be groomed as the successor to the incumbent president.

Both domestic and international observers have speculated that the constitutional reform may be intended to enable Tokayev to run for another presidential term, as has been the case in other Central Asian states. He has, however, stated that he intends to step down at the end of his term in 2029, as this is what Kazakhstanis expect of him. He is nevertheless likely to seek to retain influence within the state at that point, although not full control, as his predecessor, Nursultan Nazarbayev attempted to do, even if another individual formally holds the presidency. Media speculation also suggests that he may seek a position in an international organisation.

Although the constitutional amendments are presented as part of a process of democratisation and institutional strengthening, they in fact serve to consolidate the presidential system in Kazakhstan. As a result of these changes, the president will be less vulnerable to internal challenges and will have more effective instruments to curb opposition activity. Tokayev has most likely commenced preparations for succession three years in advance in order to avoid instability and social unrest after his term ends in 2029. By placing an ally in this position, he will seek to increase the likelihood of retaining political influence in the future.

The main factor that could threaten Tokayev's continued influence, as well as that of his successor and political circle, would be resistance from society and the political elites to the implementation of these plans. A similar situation has already occurred in Kazakhstan's recent history during the protests of January 2022, after which the current president stripped his predecessor of influence and consolidated full control over the state (see '*Kazakhstan: work starts on dismantling the Nazarbayev system*'). Today, however, given the strengthening of presidential power and the relatively low level of public engagement in political life, such a scenario appears unlikely. A severe economic crisis could possibly act as a potential trigger for social unrest.