



Kazakhstan's Echo

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with views and comments on developments in and around Kazakhstan

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Who Needs Borat? Here's the Kazakh President



President Nursultan Nazarbayev

The Republic of Kazakhstan will celebrate the 15th anniversary of its independence on December 16. During these years, Kazakhstan, under the prudent leadership of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, has turned from one of the worst off fragments of the former Soviet empire into an economically strong and dynamically developing democratic country, a recognized leader in Central Asia, and a reliable and respected player in world politics.

Kazakhstan and the United States are bound by the relations of true strategic partnership. The September 2006 meeting between Presidents Nazarbayev and George W. Bush at the White House gave a new impetus to these relations.

President Nazarbayev tells the story of how his young nation has achieved such impressive successes in domestic and foreign policies in his recent article in Britain's "Spectator" magazine.

What follows is an article from The Spectator along with the editors' introductory note:

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The Spectator, 23 November 2006

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As the task of reconstructing Iraq has turned out to be more difficult and bloodier than Western governments anticipated, I believe that the recent history of Kazakhstan can provide an important lesson for would-be nation-builders. After all, countries have emerged from a period of highly authoritarian rule, both possess substantial oil wealth and both have been subject to external pressures to introduce rapid political change.

Until 1992 when it became an independent state, Kazakhstan was desperately poor and desperately restricted. We possessed no knowledge or experience of self-government and very little understanding of how modern markets function. Independence had been thrust upon us by the turn of history and the break-up of the Soviet Union, and all we knew was that if we didn't act quickly, instead of a new and independent Kazakh nation, we would have anarchy.

The task of building a modern state in Kazakhstan was complicated by exactly the same two factors that have caused such problems in the Middle East: race and religion. Kazakhstan is predominantly Muslim, but its population includes more than 100 ethnic and religious groups, and so we faced the possibility that regional instability would sweep across our borders.

Despite possessing considerable oil reserves, conditions for nation-building were not exactly propitious, to put it mildly. But since we took charge of our own political destiny, change has come at a rapid pace. Kazakhstan is now a major exporter of oil and is set to become one of the top five producers in the next decade. Kazakhstan is one of the fastest growing economies in the world — we have achieved 10 per cent growth or more during each of the past five years. The number of people living below the poverty line has fallen from 40 per cent to under 16 per cent in the past five years. We have repaid our debts to the IMF seven years ahead of schedule, privatized more than 80 per cent of the economy, created a Norwegian-style stabilization fund that has helped tame inflation and introduced a fully funded pension scheme that I believe will one day be the envy of Western Europe.

Today there is undeniably a sense of Kazakh nationhood and national confidence. But we know from experience, some of it traumatic, that nation-building cannot be achieved on the basis of rigid timetables or utopian blueprints; nor can it be a wholly top-down process. I think this truth has been insufficiently grasped by some of those responsible for seeking to create a modern democratic Iraq. Kazakhstan has demonstrated its support for the reconstruction of Iraq by contributing to the Coalition forces and has done everything asked of it by way of assisting in the fight against terrorism. But I believe that in some respects Western expectations in relation to Iraq have been dangerously naive.

Kazakhstan's opportunity to build a modern, democratic state came as the result of disintegration of an empire rather than a military invasion, but the suddenness of that collapse meant that we too were expected to learn new ways and to acquire new habits and skills almost overnight. From the outset we faced a veritable deluge of advice and pressure from Western governments, international institutions and NGOs.

Much of this advice — particularly with respect to economic matters and to the importance of property rights and the rule of law — was invaluable. But the advice in relation to democratic change — some of it from individuals who had been in my country for only hours — was spectacularly gauche.

I knew that there could be no lasting stability without economic progress, and without stability the prospect of successful democratic change would have been zero. If democracy was to stand a chance, therefore, it would need to be introduced gradually, and preferably against a background of rising prosperity and the emergence of civil society. This meant casting a skeptical eye over a great deal of well-intentioned advice from the West. I put economic reform before democratic reform, not because I judged it to be more important but because I knew that democratic reform would stand a much greater chance of success if matters were prioritized in that way.

Let me be clear: it is not, of course, the case that Asians do not want democracy. If asked, people the world over will opt for democratic government. At the same time, they will quite naturally

be reluctant to give up habits and practices which are incompatible with democratic values until they understand that the benefits from so doing outweigh the costs. This is a process which in the case of the West took hundreds of years.

In her book, *Statecraft: Strategies for a Changing World* — excellent reading for all would-be nation-builders — Margaret Thatcher writes, ‘I do not believe that liberty and democracy are somehow alien to Asia — one only has to see the enthusiasm with which the Hong Kong Chinese welcomed the changes briefly introduced between 1992 and 1997 to grasp that. But nor do I believe that it is possible in any country — Asian or non-Asian — which lacks an understanding and experience of what is involved, to introduce democracy at a stroke without risking trouble. That is particularly so when there is a background of violence.’

Accordingly, in building the new Kazakhstan we took care to proceed gradually, adapting and modifying existing institutions, creating new ones only where this was necessary and ensuring that these reflected national characteristics. Rather than purging the old, corrupt, inefficient public services or asking civil servants to renounce their past allegiances, we opened up the civil service to competitive examination. Rather than disbanding our armed forces we renounced the huge nuclear arsenal that we were bequeathed by the Soviet army and adapted those forces for the post-Cold War era. Would-be nation-builders dangerously delude themselves if they believe that the first step in building a nation must be to destroy existing institutions and that the second must be to reach for a blank sheet of paper.

Democracy in Kazakhstan remains in its infancy, but we have had two recent elections — for the Kazakh lower house in 2004 and for the presidency in 2005 — both of which fulfilled the most important requirement of any democratic system: voters were given a genuine choice of candidates. We accept that past elections have not been flawless, but at each election our democratic institutions grow stronger. Gradualism is the key: if our approach to nation-building had been characterized by impatient schemes of political abstraction, we should most certainly have failed and the price of failure would have been catastrophic.

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