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Observers Say Election Is Step Forward, More Work Remains

President Outlines Agenda, Pledges to Work for All Kazakhs

The incumbent President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, has been returned to office by a landslide vote. The December 4th presidential election in Kazakhstan, Central Asia's most prosperous country with one of the world's fastest growing economies, showed the Kazakh peoples' strong backing for the President's progressive policies. The election exhibited significant progress over previous votes and moved Kazakhstan closer to international election standards while much work remains to be done to move Kazakhstan forward to a broader democracy, according to numerous foreign observers in Kazakhstan and the country's foreign partners.

A group of independent U.S. observers monitored the vote, calling it "an important step forward, not only for Kazakhstan but the entire region."

In a joint statement issued in Astana on December 5, the observers stated: "While not minimizing the shortcomings that are expected to be detailed in the OSCE report, this election was an important step forward in Kazakhstan's journey toward democracy and political reform. We noted with interest that all three major candidates called for an extension of elective principles to sub-national levels. Based on this election, we believe that Kazakhstan's clear regional leadership on economic and social reform can continue with further political reforms."

Signatories to the group's report included Robert Barry, former US Ambassador and former head of the OCSE Observation Mission for the 2004 Kazakhstan Majilis elections, Sarah Carey, Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Eurasia Foundation, U.S. Representative Charlie Melancon (D-LA), Frederick Starr, Chairman of Johns Hopkins University's Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, and Daniel Witt, President of the Washington-based International Tax and Investment Center.

Struan Stevenson, head of the European Parliament delegation for the election, noted "We witnessed some improvements in the electoral process and were encouraged by these signs. Nevertheless we are of the view that much work remains to be done if Kazakhstan's embryonic democracy is to grow and mature."

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) which deployed a 460-member election observation mission of its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) issued a preliminary report on December 5. Their report said "despite some improvements in the administration of



President Nazarbayev waves to his supporters in Astana as he prepares to deliver the acceptance speech on December 5.

AFP/Pool Photo

this election in the pre-election period, the presidential election did not meet a number of OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections.”

The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) fielded a delegation of more than 400 observers saying the election was “valid, democratic and legitimate” and calling it “the most democratic election yet in the CIS countries.”

At the December 5 daily U.S. State Department press briefing, Adam Ereli, the department’s deputy spokesman said: “On balance, we share the view of the OSCE observer mission in its preliminary report that the election showed some significant improvements over previous ones, but that it did not meet a number of international standards to which Kazakhstan has committed itself.” He continued: “I would note that this is a process, that you don’t go to perfect elections overnight... The system is not yet flawless but there aren’t many systems that are and we can all aspire to do better. And that’s what we call and that’s what we will be working with Kazakhstan to achieve.”

On the positive side, the OSCE noted “candidate registration was mostly inclusive and a field of five candidates provided voters with an opportunity for choice”, adding “state media largely met their legal obligations to provide free airtime to candidates.” The OSCE also gave a positive nod to a presidential decree calling for a free, fair and competitive election; greater transparency and efficiency in the work of the Central Election Commission (CEC) aimed at improving the election process and the conduct of an extensive voter education campaign; improvements in accuracy of voter lists; availability of choice between traditional paper ballots and electronic voting; a live TV debate among presidential candidates, although the incumbent chose not to participate; and access for observers to election commissions of all levels. The OSCE said “voting was conducted in a generally calm atmosphere”, and its “observers assessed the voting process positively in 92 percent of polling stations visited, and negatively in eight percent.”

The OSCE also found a number of shortcomings such as undue restrictions on campaigning, media bias in favor of the incumbent, presence of unauthorized personnel at polling stations, and others. While it said “the voting was generally calm and peaceful”, it added that “the process deteriorated during the count, which was viewed as bad or very bad in one out of four counts observed” (Out of almost 10,000 polling stations across Kazakhstan, OSCE observers were able to monitor 165 counts).

Onalsyn Zhumabekov, Chairman of Kazakhstan’s Central Election Commission, described the OSCE report as generally “objective, but there are certain conclusions we don’t agree with.” He called the election “a big step forward”, saying: “There were deficiencies. The point is their scope and did the deficiencies affect the result? ...I can already say these shortcomings did not.”

Foreign Minister Says Kazakhs’ Free Choice Should Be Respected

Kassymzhomart Tokaev, Kazakhstan’s Foreign Minister, speaking at the OSCE annual ministerial meeting in Ljubljana, Slovenia, on December 6, said “according to the assessments of independent observers from a number of countries, including those who are OSCE members, international organizations and institutions, this election was free, transparent and honest. All the unbiased observers registered no serious violations of law and confirmed the election complied with international standards.”

The Foreign Minister noted this was the “result of our strong commitment to cooperation with all international agencies, including the OSCE. The Government of my country accepted almost all of the recommendations of the observers of ODIHR’s mission in the pre-election period. We expressed our willingness to make this election free and fair. Kazakhstan managed to make it the best election in our short history as an independent country.”

Minister Tokaev added, “However, we disagree with some negative assessments which, in our view, resulted from the so called ‘technical approach’ to the election outcomes without taking into consideration the context and perspectives of the development of my country.” He noted because of that, Kazakhstan “took the preliminary report of ODIHR with certain concern. We do not over dramatize the whole situation created by the negative part of the report. However, this document cannot be deemed by us

as neutral. Unfortunately, the report produced controversial feelings and doubts among our people about the credibility of ODIHR's mission and its ability to meet the expectations of our society for a just and equal dialogue with the OSCE."

The Foreign Minister stressed, "The people of my country almost unanimously voted for President Nazarbayev's policy of reforms which has already made Kazakhstan a success story in the post-Soviet area. Our people voted for stability, prosperous economy, and a better future for their children, for a strong, competitive and democratic Kazakhstan. They voted against upheavals, interethnic conflicts, unemployment and poverty. This free choice of the multiethnic and multi-religious people of my country should be respected in the world."

Modern Touches Seen in Kazakh Election



Election commission workers empty a ballot box in Astana as they prepare to count the votes after the voting ended on December 4.

AP Photo

Electronic voting and transparent ballot boxes plus TV debates and exit polls added a very modern touch to the presidential election in Kazakhstan.

The electronic voting system, known as Sailau, was in use at 1,500 polling places, while all polling stations used transparent ballot boxes. President Nazarbayev cast his ballot electronically, while 86 percent of the electorate chose the traditional paper ballot.

As the vote drew to a close, Kazakh voters responded for the first time to Western style exit polling by domestic and foreign pollsters. One poll, commissioned by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and conducted by the Gallup Organization/Baltic Surveys in coordination with the Social and Political Research Center (Kazakhstan), concluded that 83.2 percent voted to reelect President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

Observers Call Election A "Step Forward", Say Delivery Will Be Critical for President

Rep. Charlie Melancon, Robert Barry, Frederick Starr, and Dan Witt, independent U.S. observers for Sunday's election had a further opportunity to share their reactions with the policy making community in Washington, DC, in a video conference from Astana to the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute on December 5.

Ambassador Barry called the election "a step forward", adding "it was premature to say the election met international standards", but it was "a lot better" than recent elections elsewhere in the region.

Rep. Melancon cited a very high voter turnout, 77 percent, saying he was "very impressed not only by the numbers of people, but by the mood, it was very upbeat" and showed people's interest in the democratic process. The Congressman said he was impressed that "this country almost unanimously reelected the President." The election, Rep. Melancon said, means "democracy is at work in Kazakhstan, and there is a good future for the country."

Mr. Witt said the President's high margin of victory, 91 percent, surprising even his political advisors, was explainable by sound social and economic policies over the years, improving living standards and the prevailing feeling among the people that "President Nazarbayev has delivered." He stressed voters in Kazakhstan had "a true choice in this election," adding that the opposition is making an important contribution by helping shape the policy debate.

Professor Starr called the outcome of the election "clearly a landslide" opening "a new era of boldness in Kazakh politics." He said the election gave the President "an extraordinary mandate" to pursue

his agenda, listing fighting corruption, strengthening the role of Parliament and introducing elections for governors and mayors as key.

World Leaders Congratulate Nazarbayev on Reelection

Leaders of many countries congratulated President Nazarbayev on his reelection to another seven year term.

Congratulations came from presidents Hu Jintao of China, Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia, Jacques Chirac of France, Vladimir Putin of Russia, Viktor Yuschenko of Ukraine, King Juan Carlos I of Spain and others.

Former U.S. President Bill Clinton sent a letter to President Nazarbayev where he wrote, "Recognizing that your work has received an excellent grade is one of the most important rewards in life. At the start of your new term as president, I would like to express confidence that you will continue to live up to expectations of your people."

President Welcomes Constructive Opposition in Country, Says Economic Growth, Better Living Standards Are Priorities

President Nursultan Nazarbayev, delivering his acceptance speech in Astana on December 5, told the nation "together we have held an unprecedented, fair, open and competitive election in front of the world. Our people have shown our political culture has matured."

Talking with Rep. Melancon following the election, the President explained "if some criticism is made, we will take it into consideration in order to continue to prove we are staying the course toward democratization and a free society."

In his acceptance speech, the President welcomed constructive opposition and pledged to work for the benefit of all people in Kazakhstan, "As the leader of a country on a path to democracy, I should thank my opponents for participating in this election. As a democratic country we need opposition, we need criticism but we are against fault-finding. We need new ideas, new proposals. If they were to be proposed by the opposition, they could be acted upon."

The President outlined his goals for the next term in plain language, "During the next seven years we will double [average] salaries of the people of Kazakhstan, and double pensions and scholarships for students. The country's economy will grow 2.5 times. We will provide one million of our people with new housing."

"We will do all of it together with you, with the people of Kazakhstan," he concluded.

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