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***Say it in Kazakh:
Happy Nauryz! ---
Nauryz qutti bolsyn!***

Opposition Party Registers, Now Twelve Legal Parties

The Naghyz Ak Zhol (True Bright Path) Party was registered on March 17, bringing to twelve the count of political parties legally operating in Kazakhstan.

A representative of the Registration Service Committee of the Ministry of Justice announced the news at a court hearing in Astana on March 21.

The Naghyz Ak Zhol split from the Ak Zhol party in 2005 following disagreements among its cochairmen regarding how best to oppose the current government. Ak Zhol fielded its candidate, Alikhan Baimenov, in the December 2005 presidential election, while the then unregistered Naghyz Ak Zhol supported Zharmakhan Tuyakbai, a candidate of the "For a Fair Kazakhstan" movement.

The number of political parties in Kazakhstan may change further with the expected arrival of a new Green Party and possibly others.

Under Kazakh law, a party needs to have at least 50,000 members and be evenly represented in all regions to be able to register and operate legally. Kazakhstan has a population of 15 million people, and more than one million people are thought to be members of a political party.

Opening of First Meeting of Democratization Commission Shows Wide Eagerness to Move Reforms Ahead

The first session of the State Commission on Democratization opened in Astana on March 24 revealing Kazakh desire for meaningful dialog about the future political life of the country.

"We fully intend to continue democratic reforms and political modernization of our country," President Nursultan



People brave the spring rains to enjoy the parade as it moves through the central square of Almaty. Nauryz is increasingly celebrated as a holiday by people of all ethnic groups in Kazakhstan. See stories on pages 3&4.

Nazarbayev said opening the meeting. “Our main goal remains the same, to strengthen the foundations of an open, democratic state with the rule of law which embraces both universal democratic customs and traditions of our multiethnic and multi-religious society.”

The commission was established by presidential decree earlier this month to flesh out many ideas about how to move democratization forward, developing a comprehensive program of political reforms.

Speaking at the session, the President noted that “the challenges of the 21st century demand a more dynamic modernization of the entire system of political relations” and “will require enormous efforts and extraordinary approaches from the authorities, political institutions and institutions of civil society.”

The commission follows in the footsteps of previous groups exploring the path of democracy in Kazakhstan, but there are significant differences. The new group has the highest stature. President Nazarbayev now chairs the commission himself demonstrating his commitment. The commission includes Kazakhstan’s Secretary of State, deputy speakers of both houses of parliament, representatives of political parties and public associations, leaders of parliamentary caucuses, and prominent statesmen. The Government has been commissioned to provide financial resources for the commission while the presidential administration was tasked to assist its activities.

The agenda for the meeting included enhancing the role of Parliament in forming the national government and holding it to account, possible reforms of the executive and strengthening public control over all branches of power, the introduction of elections for district mayors and of local self-government, as well as promoting the development of NGOs and news media.

The Embassy will shortly run an edition of “Kazakhstan’s Echo” on the commission with in-depth coverage of the scope of proposed political reforms.

Next Religious Congress Will Also Include Political Leaders

The second gathering of religious leaders from across the world in Kazakhstan will take place this fall in Astana and have an added dimension as political leaders are also invited to take part.

The first gathering, called the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, which took place in Astana in September 2003, led to condemnation of terrorism by all participating religions and their agreement to pursue further dialog. A total of 120 delegates attended the first Congress from 17 different religious groups, including Islam, Russian Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

Invitations to attend the second Congress were sent to 36 leaders of world religions and 32 honorary guests from the political life, Nurtai Abykayev, head of the organizing committee said.

Abykayev, who also serves as the Speaker of Kazakhstan’s Senate, said the upcoming gathering would be “devoted to the major issues of religion, society and international security” and would have three plenary sessions. The Congress is expected to result in final communiqués and resolutions, he said.

The new Palace of Peace and Harmony, now being built in the capital will be the venue for the Congress. The Palace was designed by Sir Norman Foster, a renowned British architect. It is in the form of a huge shining pyramid of steel and glass, will different sections allowing followers of different religions to follow their own ritual.

Kazakhstan’s Largest Bank Considers Foreign IPO This Year

Kazkommertsbank, Kazakhstan’s largest private bank is considering floating 17 percent of its stock in an initial public offering (IPO) on a foreign stock exchange later this year.

Kazkommertsbank’s Chief Executive Nina Zhusupova told reporters in Almaty on March 20 the bank, which currently has 375 million ordinary shares, plans to issue an additional 200 million shares and sell half of that amount to existing shareholders.

“As for the second half (of the 200 million issue), we will decide whether we will go ahead with an

IPO and sell a small stake on the foreign markets, or it will be sold to shareholders,” she said.

One hundred million shares would be roughly 17 percent of the total stock. Russia’s Aton brokerage said in a note, “At the current share price (the bank’s) share issue, if exercised in full, would be valued at around \$1.2 billion.”

Kazkommertsbank is the latest company from Kazakhstan to announce IPO plans following successful share listings by mining firms Kazakhmys and KazakhGold at the London Stock Exchange in 2005. Kazakhmys, which listed its shares in October 2005, rose to join the FTSE-100, the list of one hundred largest listed companies by value, by December of last year.

Nauryz Celebrated as Holiday of Harmony and Renewal

People across Kazakhstan celebrated Nauryz, the traditional holiday dating back 2,500 years, on March 22, the day of the spring equinox, as a holiday of friendship, harmony and renewal. There are many ways to celebrate Nauryz including parades, concerts, theatrical performances and discotheques in the street, traditional Kazakh sporting competitions, the best yurt or the largest boursak contests, fireworks, and lavish feasting.

President Nursultan Nazarbayev addressed the people at the celebrations in the largest square of Almaty, saying: “Nauryz has become the contemporary of our independence which gave us back this spring holiday.” Nauryz, which is a blend of two Farsi words, “nau” (new) and “yryz” (day), was restored as a holiday in Kazakhstan in 1990.

“On this day people should forgive the wrongs to all, hug each other and say we will walk together into the spring and the summer and will keep these good relations through faith, friendship and mutual understanding,” the President said.

People in the northern city of Kostanay witnessed the best yurt contest in their main square with a 100,000 tenge top prize (approximately US\$600). For great celebrations, a yurt, the traditional nomadic felt house, is richly decorated with ornate rugs and chests.

People in Ust Kamenogorsk in the east enjoyed their biggest boursak (fried doughnut) contest. Boursaks usually are the size of a ping-pong ball, but sometimes people can make them huge. Also in Ust Kamenogorsk, Nauryz turned out a great day for the Koreshkov brothers who led Team Kazakhstan in the recent Turin Olympics ice hockey competition. Each of them got a brand new white gleaming car from the local governor who is also the chairman of the Kazakhstan Hockey Federation.

Most of the feasts that day offered one unifying dish, the Naryz kozhe, a refreshing yogurt based drink with a total of seven “mystical” ingredients, including meat, barley and corn.

People celebrated Nauryz not only in Kazakhstan and other countries of Central Asia, but also in Austin, Texas. Following is an [article](#) by Lauren Kent from the March 21 edition of The Daily Texan of the University of Texas at Austin.

Honoring a Kazakh “New Year”

Students commemorate and feast during the spring equinox celebration of Nauryz

On the eve of the spring equinox, students and curious spectators played games and enjoyed a feast Monday near the South Mall to commemorate Nauryz, the Kazakh “new year” holiday. The celebration originated more than 2,500 years ago in Persia. Eventually other areas of the world adopted the tradition, and today some form of Nauryz is celebrated in Kazakhstan, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, parts of China and Russia and other Eastern European countries.

Nauryz is meant to symbolize beginnings and good luck for the coming year. Family members gather to give blessings, forgive debts and end quarrels. Events that occurred in the first 13 days after the New Year are believed to indicate how the rest of the year will go, so forgiveness and kindness are encouraged.

The feast is an important part of the celebration. A few traditional dishes were offered at the festivities, such as Plov, a rice dish with meat and vegetables. These dishes are typically made with seven ingredients representing the blessings of health, wealth, joy, luck, wisdom, speedy growth and heavenly protection. The feast commences at noon, is opened by a prayer honoring the family's forefathers and is closed by a blessing, or bata, by the eldest family member in attendance.

"Food for your mind" was also encouraged at the event. A table set up next to the food offered traditional recipes, papers about the holiday and a poster describing Abai Kunanbaev, a man known as the "father of Kazakh poetry."

This year is the first that the Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies organized a Nauryz celebration on campus. Allegra Azulay, the outreach coordinator for the center, said the goal was to make the Central Asia region "more available to students." However, some of the gaming that is usually held on Nauryz had to be modified to fit the surroundings.

"We wanted to have falconry and camel races on the South Mall," Azulay said. "But we couldn't get the University to agree to that. So we decided to have a slightly modest version of the traditional races."

The modified version included a contest to see who could toss a stuffed toy camel closest to an urn of tea.

Azulay also hosted a quiz on Kazakh sayings, which were spoken first in Kazakh by Dana Abizaid, a graduate student in Russian, East European and European studies. Those from the region had a one-up on American students when guessing the endings to sayings such as: "Do not mention birds of prey –" the end of which is "in the presence of cattle."

Cynthia Buckley, a sociology professor who specializes in Central Asian studies, said she also hopes to generate more student interest in the region. She said the University will be trying to add Kazakh language courses to the curriculum again.

"Kazakhstan is [a] very important country to the United States," said Buckley. "It is a land of burgeoning markets, vast oil reserves, cultural diversity and incredible natural beauty. It isn't just of interest to 'West Wing' fans."



Kirill Pak, Kuanysh Shaikenov and Darkhan Sydykov smile during a camel-toss competition. The festivities featured games and trivia about Kazakh culture, as well as talks from graduate students.

Media Credit: Joey Castillo

Things to Watch:

- The Chairman-in-Office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht will visit Kazakhstan from March 26 to 28. Kazakhstan seeks the rotating chairmanship in the 55-member OSCE in 2009. Kazakhstan will be the first country visited by De Gucht on his tour of Central Asia.
- A new crew for the International Space Station will blast off the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan in the Soyuz capsule on March 30, 2006. The crew includes U.S. astronaut Geoffrey Williams, Russian cosmonaut Pavel Vinogradov and Brazil's first astronaut Marcos Pontes.

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News Bulletin of the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the USA and Canada
Contact person: Roman Vassilenko
1401 16th Street NW, Washington DC 20036
Tel.: 202 232 5488 ext. 104, Fax: 202 232 5845