



# *Kazakhstan's Echo*

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## **President Nazarbayev Says “Democracy Is Our Choice”**

The first session of the State Commission on Democratization was held in Astana on March 24 under the chairmanship of Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

The State Commission includes members of Parliament, leaders of political parties and nongovernmental organizations. The State Commission's task is to find ways and means for continued democratic reform in Kazakhstan.

President Nazarbayev spoke at the session underscoring the need for a “people's examination” of all political reforms and for the people's support for reforms, calling on all interested parties to engage in the dialog and cooperation in implementing the reforms.

Following are key excerpts from the President's remarks.

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Today, our country and society stand on the threshold of a new stage of development. Political reform is one the most important tasks.

Having created the foundation for our independence and statehood and a strong market economy, we set the goal of joining the ranks of the most competitive countries with high standards of living.

Democracy is a choice of civilized peoples, and it is our choice. We fully intend to continue consistent democratic reforms and political modernization of our country. Our main goal remains the same: to strengthen the foundations of an open, democratic state with the rule of law which embraces both the universal democratic customs and traditions of our multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.

During the past year and a half the National Commission was one of the most important forums for reform where interests of different political and public forces were coordinated, and mutually acceptable solutions were sought.



Photo by Sergei Bondarenko and Bolat Otarbaev

**President Nursultan Nazarbayev (center) talks to members of the State Commission on Democratization in Astana on March 24.**

Today, it is particularly timely to both promote this dialog, and, more importantly, to implement in practice the agreements on key issues of political modernization. With that in mind, the status of the commission was changed; its mandate and membership were expanded. From now on, I will chair the commission personally.

### **First. Implementation of the results of public discussion of the National Program of Democratic Reforms**

During the past year, the National Program of Democratic Reforms, a comprehensive package of reforming the state, political and public institutions of Kazakhstan was publicly discussed across the nation. I have viewed its main goal as creating an effective system of state structure capable of responding to modern global challenges and ensuring the implementation of national interests of the entire society based on democratic procedure.

The public discussion of political reforms has demonstrated a comprehensive support existing for the proposed reforms.

The following issues and proposals took center stage:

- Continued development and strengthening of key political institutions of our country;
- More effective interaction of different branches of government power;
- An independent public control over the activity of different branches of government power and strengthening accountability, transparency and effectiveness of all branches;
- Expansion of responsibility and strengthening the role of Parliament;
- Developing a system of political checks and balances;
- More active participation of political parties in the country's political life;
- NGOs need to find their real place in our society;
- Strengthening the guarantees of rights and freedoms of all our citizens.

Still timely were other issues such as:

- The accountability of authorities to the people, including the accountability of elected officials; and
- Problems of corruption.

More importantly, the public discussion has demonstrated that the process of our democratic reforms should be incremental and should not be rolled back because of some internal threats or public conflicts.

We need to once again carefully look through the entire spectrum of proposals we have received, and prepare recommendations to legally define the initiatives of the highest social and political value.

I do not exclude that this may require reforming the Constitution, the possibility of which I spoke in my speech to Parliament last September.

I would like to stress yet again the need for "people's examination" of all of our actions in developing and implementing political reforms, understanding of these reforms and support from the overwhelming majority of our society for them. Public reforms and building a democratic society should be done paying attention to traditional values, as well as using advanced experience and advice from our friends in the developed democracies.

Today, we need to find an optimal balance between the speed of democratic change and the preservation of a stable equilibrium and high level of legitimacy for the existing political system.

The basis for all our actions should be the parameters upon which we agreed last September. I would remind you that the Program of Political Reforms will encompass the six year period, from 2006 to 2011, and its practical implementation should be done consistently in two stages, from 2006 to 2008, and from 2009 through 2011.

### **Second. Further democratization, strengthening institutions of civil society**

Today, consistent actions are needed to raise the effectiveness of the Executive Branch. I believe at this stage the following are necessary:

1. Conducting a broad discussion and analysis of possible changes in the structure of the Executive Branch, needed to ensure the responsible actions of all government institutions.

2. Creating and introducing a unified system of evaluating the effectiveness of functions of the Government in implementing the planned reforms.

3. Developing and adopting a specific program ensuring mechanisms of transparency and accountability in the Executive Branch.

I would like to specifically emphasize the need to transform relations between the state bodies and citizens from administrative to “service” type of way of offering services. In this respect, we need a stage by stage and expeditious implementation of ‘e-Government’. This will undoubtedly have a positive effect on the activities of the Executive, and lead to reductions in corruption and administrative barriers.

Even at this stage we can take steps to strengthen the authority and responsibilities of the Parliament, continuously develop bodies of local self-government, assign responsibilities between the central and local executive bodies.

At this stage, we should concentrate our efforts on the following tasks:

1. Developing concrete mechanisms for the participation of the Parliament in forming the central Government and mechanisms for keeping the Parliament informed by members of the Government. We are moving ahead in this area, but not everything which is possible under the Constitution.

2. Reviewing the issue of an optimally possible expansion in the number deputies in the Majilis and the Senate.

3. Developing legislation and “social mechanisms” of local self-government, as well as strengthening the authority of akims (mayors) at the basic levels.

4. Creating a new and more effective system of budgetary controls.

5. The Akims at all levels must and will annually report on their activity directly to the people. Such practices have already proved effective.

We need to take measures to strengthen the role and functions of political parties. We also need to discuss the issues of authority of party caucuses in the Parliament.

We should continuously implement measures to further improve the conditions for nongovernmental organizations in accordance with the internationally accepted standards. Particular attention should be given to their full-fledged participation in the development of our society, as well as to their openness and accountability.

Strengthening and developing the news media should become one of the key priorities in ensuring the freedom of speech in our country and independent oversight of the activity of the authorities. For that, we need comprehensive development of professionalism, independence and professional ethics in the journalistic community. The guarantees of freedom for the news media should also include their moral responsibility to the society, and compliance of their activity with the law.

### **Third. Ensuring the rule of law and strengthening the system of guarantees of rights and freedoms of citizens of Kazakhstan**

I believe special emphasis in implementing program of democratic reforms should be made in strengthening the foundations of a state within the rule of law. Democracy and respect for law are inseparable, and one cannot exist without the other. All humanistic ideas which put interests of a human being in the center of the state interests, all the ideas of democracy, rights and freedoms will remain unrealized without the rule of law.

At this stage the legislative basis delineating guarantees of rights and freedoms of the citizens of Kazakhstan and ensuring the rule of law is of especial importance. This means that we can:

- Evaluate and provide recommendations on how to improve the effectiveness or bring appropriate changes into the mechanisms ensuring the rule of law in Kazakhstan.
- Take comprehensive measures to strengthen the guarantee of the rights of citizens within the court system and during the implementation of court decisions.
- Take measures to strengthen the independence of the judiciary, improve transparency and effectiveness of justice in this direction.
- Introduce gradually court sanctioning of arrests.
- Evaluate the introduction of jury trials in criminal prosecutions and provide appropriate recommendations.
- Develop a system of administrative measures aimed at creating a comprehensive system of contractual relationships in the society.

I would like to stress once again that the rule of law, social progress and human rights are in inseparable unity. I hope this understanding will have a defining role as we pursue our endeavors.

Motherland, Independence, and stable development! This is our common slogan. This will ensure calm and a prosperous life for all of the people in Kazakhstan.

### **Fourth. Additional strengthening of public harmony and stability in our multi-religious and multi-ethnic society**

The foundation of our strategy of political reforms lies primarily in the stability of our society and a broad public agreement on basic values of modernization of Kazakhstan.

In this light, special attention must be given to further strengthening of harmony and consolidating our society for the successful achievement of this ambitious goal which we have set ourselves.

1. Special attention should be given to a dialog with the people of Kazakhstan about proposed reforms and about the expected consequences of the changes. We need to determine

how to pursue this modernization not only in accordance with international democratic standards, but also with a view of both potential positive and negative effects.

2. We should not allow a situation where the process of democratization and political modernization in the country could be used as a catalyst for destabilization, religious or ethnic conflicts.

3. We need to think seriously about using the existing structures ensuring inter-ethnic and inter-religious tolerance and understanding in Kazakhstan. I have already talked about the need to strengthen the Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan. We need to give it more authority and expand its activities through legislation.

The challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century demand a more dynamic modernization of the entire system of social and political relations which will allow Kazakhstan to become a full-fledged and respected member of the international community and provide a basis for claiming a place among the world's most competitive countries during the next decade.

I will not hide the fact that reaching that goal will require enormous efforts and new extraordinary approaches from the authorities, political institutions and civil society.

The greatness of this goal is that we want our people to live as well as citizens of other countries in that club. I believe we all want that. So let us make this goal the idea for every person in Kazakhstan.

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Following the session's discussions, the President noted the need to determine concrete mechanisms and timetables for democratic reforms.

The President has instructed the central Government to finalize creation of legislation for decentralization of authority and implementation of local self-government, introducing bills in Parliament within the first half of this year (There are more than 7,400 villages and 2,000 rural districts in Kazakhstan). His other instructions included preparing the ground for holding new elections at the district level later this year. For villages, the President proposed holding elections for *kenes* (councils), local representative bodies which would elect their chairmen, thus completing the infrastructure of local self-government.

Among the priorities listed were:

- Strengthening the independence, transparency and effectiveness of the judiciary;
- Improving transparency and openness in activities of national state owned companies;
- Introducing legislative amendments for partial state financing of political parties represented in Parliament;
- Developing civil society and supporting nongovernmental organizations.

To ensure the effective work of the State Commission, the Presidential Administration was told to develop and submit a plan for its work within a month, while the Government was instructed to provide financing for the commission.

In conclusion, President Nazarbayev said:

Different points of view will be offered, but the discussion generally shows that there are no insurmountable obstacles to dialog. We all need to adopt the culture of dialog.

We are all builders of an independent Kazakhstan. Long years of joint and fruitful work tie us together. We all not only want, but must find main points of agreement on key issues through civilized dialog.

There were no simple stages in our recent political history. We had to build everything from scratch. Today, our nation faces a task of enormous difficulty, that of achieving national competitiveness.

As we work to achieve such a far reaching political goal as creating a modern political system, there is no other way than public harmony. This is our common responsibility to history, to the people and to the future of Kazakhstan.

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