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President Nazarbayev: Now is the Time for a New Stage in Kazakhstan's Development



*President Nursultan Nazarbayev addresses
Parliament explaining his vision of the country's future*

Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev, speaking at a joint session of Parliament in Astana on May 16, outlined a program of further democratization of the country.

The upcoming reforms of the political system call for a new balance of power between branches of government and the strengthening of the role of Parliament by giving it some of the responsibilities held now by the President. Moreover, Kazakhstan's leader proposed reducing the term of office for the president from seven to five years.

"By this step, we want to underscore the firmness of our democratic aspirations, and make equal terms of office for key elected subjects of power," President Nazarbayev explained.

"I propose a path of such changes to our Constitution that the republic will stay a presidential one but with significantly expanded authorities of Parliament. This will transform our republic's model from a presidential one into a combined presidential and parliamentary," President Nazarbayev said introducing a bill offering amendments to the Constitution.

He proposed switching to a proportional election system for members of the Majilis (the Parliament's lower house) and increasing the number of deputies of both houses of Parliament from 116 to 154. "A new form of elections in Kazakhstan should give political parties additional opportunities for strengthening their role in the country's political system while ensuring real reflection of the strength of political forces and the true will of the people," the President noted.

Kazakhstan's Government will be formed under a new arrangement. According to President Nazarbayev, "The key moment here is the creation of new rules for forming and functioning of the Government based on parliamentary majority. From now on, the Majilis will play the main role in approving the Prime Minister, which means the entire Government." This will give political parties more power in forming the Government and will mean that a party of parliamentary majority will bear responsibility for the formation and further actions of a Government which will be called upon to

implement the program of the ruling party or coalition. Another proposal would also strengthen the authority of Parliament in effectively controlling Government's actions. In order to express the vote of no confidence in the Government, the Majilis would now need only a simple majority, not a two thirds majority as before.

Moreover, "two thirds of the Constitutional Council, the Central Election Commission and the Accounting Committee will be appointed by Parliament. These changes will significantly strengthen the role of the legislature," the President said.

As a means to help further promote civil society, another proposal calls for repealing the constitutional restriction on state financing of public associations and developing practical mechanisms for partial financing of political parties' activities from the national budget.

Kazakhstan's leader also believes it is feasible to appoint akims (governors) of regions with the approval of relevant maslikhats (local assemblies), and to extend the terms of office for maslikhats from four to five years.

In the area of judicial reform, the court sanctioning of arrest is to be introduced in addition to jury trials for criminal cases already in place.

The President also proclaimed what in a sense is the abolition of death penalty in Kazakhstan: "Having instituted the death penalty through the Constitution only for terrorist crimes leading to deaths and for especially grave crimes during wartime, Kazakhstan, in a sense, is becoming a country where the death penalty will not be carried out."

The above mentioned proposals were prepared by the State Commission on the development and concretization of democratic reforms, which included representatives of the Parliament, the Government, political parties and public associations. The proposals are fundamentally a quintessence of proposals from all strata of Kazakhstan's society, in a way, a national program of democratic reforms.

The President said the proposed reforms were timely and based on social, economic and political successes of Kazakhstan since its independence. For example, Kazakhstan's gross domestic product grew 75 percent during the past seven years reaching 3,600 dollars per capita. A true multi-party political system and institutions of civil society has been developed. Overall, a new political culture has grown in the country. President Nazarbayev said: "The process of political modernization in our country has been going on consistently, as necessary economic conditions were coming into being, since our independence. We follow our own way, the Kazakhstan way, of development, which we chose once and have followed ever since. Having studied and analyzed international experiences, we chose precisely the way of evolution. We are against forced introduction of democracy, especially from beyond our borders. We are not trying to copy anybody, but are doing what is needed for our country and our people. And we are successful at that. Our principle, economy first, then politics, has fully proved itself correct... Our Constitution has allowed us to cover a long road in both economic and political changes. Kazakhstan's new national legislation is proof of that. It is based on this legislation that we created a firm foundation for transforming Kazakhstan into a country of real democratic institutions which guarantees the rights and freedoms of its citizens. In that period we have achieved a social and economic breakthrough and become a regional leader... The need to build the Kazakhstan statehood and market economy up from scratch, and the development of a liberal political system for the first time in our history all required a decisive consolidation of our society. That is why I had assumed the entire responsibility for what was going on in the country, and that was a necessary step. Yet, today, when all the main parameters of the country's modernization are determined, and we understand that this process is irreversible, there is a sense in transferring certain responsibilities and duties from the President to the Parliament."

"Modern challenges and threats urgently demanded a more dynamic modernization of the entire system of social, economic and political relations. We have accepted that challenge," the President

stressed. He noted that it is time to provide a legislative basis to ensure success for liberal reforms now underway and lead to a new system checks and balances in the country. “It is time to introduce amendments into the Constitution of Kazakhstan and enter a new stage of development of our country,” President Nazarbayev said.

On the same day, the Parliament of Kazakhstan approved the proposed amendments to the Constitution in the first reading.

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