

The Kazakh Way to Democracy: Evolution, Not Revolution

Kazakhstan rapidly approaches the crucial December 4th presidential election which will define the future of our country and the region. As U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said recently in Astana, "with the presidential election in December, Kazakhstan has an unprecedented opportunity to lead Central Asia toward a future of democracy and to elevate U.S.-Kazakhstan relations to a new level."

This election is important because a free and fair election in Kazakhstan will not only confirm our leadership in economy and democracy, but will demonstrate the success of an evolutionary way of development for countries of the region to achieve real progress and prosperity. The evolutionary way envisions economic reforms followed immediately by consistent political liberalization, in other words, the way President Nursultan Nazarbayev has led Kazakhstan throughout the years of independence. It is this "Kazakh Way" of development that is now viewed internationally as better for nations in transition than two other alternatives: a complete absence of reforms or their stirring up through revolutions of various colors.

U.S. President George W. Bush in a recent letter to President Nazarbayev noted, "Recent events in the region underscore the importance of balanced economic growth, accountable governance, and the expansion of democracy... The stability and prosperity that your country enjoys stand as a model for other countries in the region... It is in this same spirit that I urge you to take steps to ensure that economic reforms are buttressed by equally bold democratic reform in Kazakhstan. Moving in this direction, by holding free and fair presidential elections that meet international standards, for example, will give you a strong political and moral mandate to pursue the goals outlined in your February speech to the nation..."

Kazakhstan, the world's ninth largest country, is strategically located in the heart of Eurasia. During 14



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A woman inspects election posters of five presidential candidates in Astana as she prepares to make her choice on December 4.

years of independence, its 15 million people have transformed what was once one of the Soviet Union's most backward republics into an economically strong state with a growing democracy. Our economy is one of the five

fastest growing in the world and today is larger than the economies of the seven countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus combined.

Based on impressive economic successes, Kazakhstan is moving forward with an ambitious program of further democratization, including strengthening Parliament, decentralizing authority, building a more independent judiciary and introducing jury trials. The upcoming presidential election will be key to the success of this program and to Kazakhstan's growing leadership in the region.

This election campaign is the most competitive on record. Initially 18 people, including five women, sought the presidency. Five of the 18 fulfilled all constitutional requirements for candidates and each offers their own vision of the future. The campaign, conducted under a new law on elections and a presidential decree designed to ensure fair and transparent voting, has already seen new openness and greater interest. Kazakhs are watching with curiosity as traditional and Western know-how meet in the campaign which now includes meetings with voters, baby-kissing rallies, door-to-door campaigning, as well as a massive use of positive and negative political ads. Kazakhs view the upcoming election as vital for their future. Polls show 75 percent of voters intend to cast their ballots with the firm belief that the future of their country depends on it.

We are firmly committed to making certain the Kazakhstan election is free and fair, that it demonstrates significant progress over prior elections, and, most importantly, clearly reflects the will of our people, including members of the 100 ethnic groups who will go to the polls. The election will likely not be perfect; elections are never

perfect, even in the United States. Most important are our sincere aspirations to bring the election as close as possible to international standards, taking another step on the road to greater democracy. The election is neither the beginning, nor the end of that journey, but a step in our continued movement forward.

Kazakhstan is an active member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and is already campaigning for the OSCE chairmanship in 2009. The objective assessment of our election by OSCE observers will naturally be most significant for us.

In today's complex and increasingly interdependent world, Kazakhstan's continued evolutionary success on its way to ever greater democracy and progress is also important for the United States.

As a secular Muslim majority country which only recently freed itself from the shackles of totalitarianism, today we are proving the "Kazakh Way" can provide a better life for the people while leading to greater democracy. Kazakhstan's example is, therefore, very useful for the United States in successfully promoting democracy and freedom in the world.

Kazakhstan and the United States are bound together by a solid strategic partnership that is based on shared values of freedom, prosperity and security.

In the years since Kazakhstan's independence, our countries have walked together along the path of cooperation to strengthen global security. The walk began with joint work to help Kazakhstan rid itself of the fourth largest

The December 4th presidential election will have a major impact on the future of Kazakhstan, the region and its relations with the United States

nuclear arsenal in the world. Today, this walk continues, and Kazakhstan is a firm partner for the United States, providing practical assistance in the fight against terrorism. Kazakhstan became one of the very few Muslim majority nations, and the only country in Central Asia, to support U.S.-led efforts to restore peace in Iraq by sending a military contingent there.

Our economic cooperation is growing stronger and stronger. The United States is the largest foreign investor in Kazakhstan, and more than 300 companies with U.S. participation work in our country, accounting for almost \$15 billion in investment. Kazakhstan will soon be one of the top ten oil exporters in the world, and the outlook for investment sees tens of billions of dollars flowing into energy and other industries.

We are confident that after our December 4th election the Kazakhstan-United States strategic partnership and friendship will become stronger, reinforced by the development of our democracy. We firmly believe that only by keeping our commitment to democracy and freedom, and by acting together, will we be able to meet modern challenges.

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PHOTO BY SERGEI BONDARENKO

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Astana in October 2005 where she met President Nursultan Nazarbayev (right) and said, "With the presidential election in December, Kazakhstan has an unprecedented opportunity to lead Central Asia toward a future of democracy and to elevate U.S.-Kazakhstan relations to a new level." Included in the photograph are Ambassador Kanat Saudabayev (second from left) and Kazakhstan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Kassymzhomart Tokaev.

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