



Feature Article
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Tokayev's Reforms: An Evolutionary Model of Change?

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The Middle East and Central Asia have proven particularly resistant to democratic development. Popular revolts from 2003 to 2011 led to expectations of democratic breakthroughs, but setbacks in all countries that experienced such revolts indicate that revolution is not a sustainable model to change entrenched authoritarian habits. In contrast, an evolutionary model of political development is emerging in countries as diverse as Kazakhstan, Morocco, and Uzbekistan. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's reform agenda following his 2019 election breaks with Kazakhstan's earlier development model by advocating for parallel economic and political reforms. Against the background of growing popular demands for change, it remains to be seen whether the Kazakh model of reforms – and more broadly the evolutionary model across the region – will succeed.

Much ink has been spilled in recent decades on the failures of democratization in the Middle East and Central Asia. Indeed, for over a decade and a half, Freedom House and other democracy watchdogs have been documenting a clear regression of democratic development. This has happened not only in countries considered in “transition”, but also in established democracies, where authoritarian tendencies have, unexpectedly, returned.



President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Kassymzhomart Tokayev speaks from the rostrum during the celebration of May 1.

The Middle East and Central Asia have proven particularly resistant to democratic development. The resilience of authoritarian systems of government in these regions caused considerable frustration, which switched to great excitement when popular revolutions against corrupt and dysfunctional government took place between 2003 and 2011. The wave of revolutions began in Georgia, followed by Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, upheavals quickly dubbed “color revolutions.” These were followed several years later by the 2011 “Arab spring”, which similarly generated great hope that democracy had finally come to the Middle East.

Except it did not work out that way. The color revolutions and Arab upheavals must now be termed a failure, as no country that experienced these upheavals has progressed in a sustainable way toward democracy. Some, like Libya, Syria and Yemen have descended into civil war. Others, like Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, experienced recurrent political crises while continuing to be mired in corruption. For some time, Georgia and Tunisia appeared to go against the grain, and make sustained progress – but in recent years, those two have also backtracked. All in all, it seems clear that revolution is not a sustainable model to change entrenched authoritarian habits.

But if revolution does not work, what does? Is there an evolutionary model of political development that holds promise? There are indications that the leadership in some regional countries have concluded that they can no longer engage in business as usual; they must answer the popular demand for change, while seeking to maintain control of the political process to maintain stability and avoid upheavals. This is happening in countries as diverse

as Azerbaijan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Morocco, and Uzbekistan.

Among these, Kazakhstan is important because of its strategic location between Russia and China – but also because its newfound reformist zeal is a clear departure from the past. In fact, Kazakhstan’s leaders were until recently outspoken in their sequencing: they would first engage in economic reforms, and only later turn to politics. This has now changed. Following the 2014 oil price collapse, a realization set in that the country could no longer wait; political and economic reforms now had to be advanced simultaneously. This became explicit government policy following the election of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev as President, following the unexpected resignation in 2019 of the country’s First President, Nursultan Nazarbayev.

President Tokayev launched his presidency by announcing the concept of a “Listening State,” which would be receptive to the demands of society. In 2019, he established the National Council of Public Trust (NCPT), a presidential advisory board constituted of representatives of the public, of the government, and of civil society. The role of the NCPT is to facilitate an open dialogue between the government and the public about necessary reform initiatives, and much of the Council’s work has translated directly into reform packages signed into law.

Some of the more impactful reforms derived from the NCPT’s work involve the improvement of political participation in parliament – provided for in a series of laws and amendments delivered in three separate reform packages between 2019 and 2021. This included reforms that made it easier to form political parties, and introduced a quota for 30% participation of women and young people (18-

28) in electoral party lists. Furthermore, Tokayev introduced reforms to strengthen the role of parliament, including by developing the role of the opposition. Opposition parties in the lower house of parliament, known as the Mazhilis, are guaranteed chairmanship of one standing committee and the secretary position of two standing committees; and the threshold for political parties to gain representation in the Mazhilis has been reduced from 7% to 5% of total votes cast in the parliamentary elections.

Western democracy advocates tend to focus very much on the most sensitive elections at the national level. Kazakhstan's leadership thinks differently: President Tokayev's strategy appears to be to build a democratic culture from the local level up, thus maintain political stability at the center while expanding political participation. Reforms now allow for direct election of local governors, known as akims. Previously, regional and city akims were appointed by the president while district and rural akims were indirectly elected by vote in local councils known as maslikhats. Maslikhats, meanwhile, were elected after candidates were nominated by "[republican or local public associations](#)." Now, however, maslikhats are selected based on proportional representation among the different political parties. Rural akims are now elected directly by the citizens – the first such election took place in July 2021. While regional and city akims were not included in that election, Tokayev suggested at the fifth meeting of the NCPT that they [will be included](#) in the 2024 election.

The struggle against corruption holds a key role in the reforms in Kazakhstan. This should come as no surprise: the region's political upheavals over the past two decades were arguably motivated more by

resentment against corruption than dissatisfaction with authoritarianism per se. President Tokayev considers the fight against corruption a central priority in driving entrepreneurial values and establishing a developed economy. He even labels corruption the "[gravest crime against the state](#)." As a result, Kazakhstan has taken care to develop relevant institutional partnerships and ensure that their reforms are guided by international standards. The strongest example is the country's participation in the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan (IACAP), a 2003 program launched by the OECD's Anti-Corruption Network. Kazakhstan's national anti-corruption strategy is almost entirely driven by the recommendations made in the IACAP. The strategy was launched in 2015 and involves reforming recruitment and professional regulatory standards of the judiciary, civil service, and law enforcement. Not only have several laws and amendments been written toward these goals, but the country's Anti-Corruption Service enjoys greater law enforcement authority after a series of reorganizations starting in 2016, and the OECD's monitoring reports indicate that Kazakhstan has made progress on almost all of its recommendations, though there remains a great deal of work to be done.

Kazakhstan also works with other international organizations. The OSCE recently backed a pilot program in the Karaganda Province that aims to transition the nation's law enforcement to a service model of community policing. Additionally, in 2020 Kazakhstan became the 50th member of the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), an organization within the Council of Europe that seeks to monitor member states' anti-corruption standards. The partnership is too new to have borne

any fruit, but the fact that Kazakhstan has entered the organization as the only non-member of the Council of Europe (aside from the US) speaks volumes about the country's commitment to increasing international engagement and to combatting corruption. Their efforts have already translated to continued improvement in the country's rankings on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index over the past few years.

These signals are encouraging. At the same time, it is clear that the leadership of Kazakhstan is not getting ahead of itself: the political reforms are gradual indeed, with the government seeking to maintain its control over the political process. For example, the rural elections did not lead to a plethora of choice for voters. Of the 2,297 candidates who ran for office as a rural akim in this year's elections, only 38% ran with a party, but of the 730 candidates who were elected, [85% were members](#) of the ruling Nur Otan party. Similarly, the changes to the parliamentary system did not expand the playing field to those political groupings that have been outside the system – it chiefly focused on those considered “loyal opposition.” In Kazakhstan's case, the problem is compounded by the role of a fugitive billionaire in exile, whose legal problems have mounted in Western countries as well as Russia, but who continues to fund radical political opposition groups in Kazakhstan. The recent reforms have made sure to not do anything that would make life easier for such disruptive forces.

Similarly, despite the progress that has been made in anti-corruption, Kazakhstan has yet to institute certain reforms that are fundamental in aligning the country's policies with international standards. The Anti-Corruption Service, for example, may be a

fully-fledged law enforcement agency with sufficient authority to crack down on violations even among the nation's top officials, but the OECD notes that they still report to the president, which prevents them from being entirely independent of political influence. It is clear that in this case, as in others, that Tokayev wants to guide substantive reform, but that he intends to maintain control over the process.

This tension plays out further in issues of human rights, particularly those concerning freedoms of expression and of assembly. These freedoms are guaranteed in Kazakhstan's constitution, but in practice the government has restricted their implementation. In 2020, Tokayev introduced amendments to Kazakhstan' criminal code that softened the language concerning “fomenting” of hatred, a vaguely defined term that had been used to target dissidents in the past. But it remains to be seen whether prosecutors will stop using this article to target the government's opponents.

The President also introduced changes to a very contentious law on public rallies. Kazakhstan's government used to require citizens to obtain permission from the government to hold peaceful rallies, and in practice few permits were given, and when they were, the assigned locations were far from city centers. In several addresses to the nation, President Tokayev emphasized that this would change, and that peaceful rallies should be considered a normal thing in a country that, he argued, must overcome the “fear of alternative opinions.”

As a result, the law was changed and organizers are now required only to notify the government of their intention to hold rallies. Still, local officials maintain the power to reject notifications. President Tokayev may seek to indicate a willingness to address such

issues, but the implementation of these changes remain to be seen. Real change will require a change in the mentality of government officials at all levels, from one seeking to protect the state from society to one protecting society from the state.

Kazakhstan's many critics suspect that Tokayev's failure to institute substantive democratic reform may be an indication that no such reform will ever come. While the speed of reform may be disputed, the importance of the overt embrace of political change at the top level should not be discounted. Contrary to the past, the country's top leadership now recognizes that, in Tokayev's words, "successful economic reforms are no longer possible without the modernisation of the country's socio-political life." Still, Kazakh leaders are concerned not to be "running ahead of ourselves." As Nazarbayev frequently did, Tokayev explicitly points to the dangers of liberalizing too fast, citing

the instability that followed in the wake of the color revolutions and Arab Spring.

Thus, President Tokayev is trying to walk a thin rope: on one hand, he seeks to maintain control and avoid the destabilization that has resulted from uncontrolled liberalization. On the other, he seeks to placate public demands for change, while advancing Kazakhstan's ambition to gain a spot among the world's 30 most developed economies by mid-century. That, everyone understands, will require thorough reforms in the political field.

Between now and 2050, it will become clear whether Kazakhstan has found a model of evolutionary change that will succeed where attempts at revolutionary change failed.

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