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## DEMOCRATIC REFORMS IN THE POLITICAL SPACE OF KAZAKHSTAN: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND CHALLENGES

Kazakhstan faced the biggest political crisis in early January 2022 in over three decades since its independence in 1991. The crisis began with protests over rising fuel prices which turned into widespread unrest followed by the crackdown and finally returning back to normalcy. It is believed that for the Kazakh President, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, this has been the biggest crisis during his presidency, but since he has been able to control the situation it also offers an opportunity, particularly in matters of democratic reforms in the country. The article focusses on the recent developments and challenges concerning the democratic reforms undertaken in Kazakhstan. The main aim and objective is to review the key initiatives towards democratic reforms, especially the political reforms taken by Kazakhstan both before and during the period of Tokayev's presidency. This is so because both the founding President as well as the current President have believed that democratic reforms in the political space of Kazakhstan is indispensable if this Central Asian country has to make a move into the World's top 30 most developed nations. The methods used in this research mainly include qualitative that helped understand diverse opinions and experiences of Kazakhstan in its democratic reforms programmes and initiatives. The article concludes that despite a series of measures aimed at implementing the democratic reforms, it is still too early to predict how the democratic reforms in the political space of Kazakhstan will take shape in the future.

**Key words:** Political Reforms, Kazakhstan-2030" Strategy, Kazakhstan-2050, Five Institutional Reforms and 100 Concrete Steps.

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### Қазақстанның саяси кеңістігіндегі демократиялық реформалар: соңғы оқиғалар мен сын-қатерлер

Қазақстан 2022 жылғы қаңтар айының басында 1991 жылы тәуелсіздік алғаннан бергі отыз жылдан астам уақыттағы ең үлкен саяси дағдарысқа тап болды. Дағдарыс жанармай бағасының қымбаттауына қарсы наразылықтардан басталып, ол жаппай тәртіпсіздікке, одан кейін қуғын-сүргінге ұласып, соңында бәрі өз орнына келді. Қазақстан президенті Қасым-Жомарт Тоқаев үшін бұл оның президенттігінде орын алған ең үлкен дағдарыс болғанымен, ол дер кезінде жағдайды бақылауға алды, ал бұл өз кезегінде елдегі демократиялық реформалар үшін мүмкіндіктер ашады. Мақалада Қазақстанда жүргізіліп жатқан демократиялық реформаларға қатысты соңғы оқиғалар мен мәселелерге назар аударылады. Негізгі мақсат және міндет – демократиялық реформаларға бағытталған негізгі бастамаларды, атап айтқанда, Тоқаевтың президенттігіне дейін де, оның кезінде де Қазақстан жүргізген саяси реформаларды қарастыру. Себебі негізін қалаушы президент те, қазіргі президент те осы Орталық Азия мемлекеті әлемнің дамыған 30 елінің қатарына енуі үшін Қазақстанның саяси кеңістігінде демократиялық реформалар болуы қажет деп есептейді. Бұл зерттеуде қолданылған әдістер негізінен Қазақстанның демократиялық реформалар бағдарламалары мен бастамаларындағы әртүрлі көзқарастар мен тәжірибелерді түсінуге көмектескен сапалы әдістерді қамтиды. Мақалада демократиялық қайта құруларды жүзеге асыруға бағытталған бірқатар шараларға қарамастан, болашақта Қазақстанның саяси кеңістігінде демократиялық қайта құрулардың қалай дамидынын болжауға әлі ерте екені айтылған.

**Түйін сөздер:** саяси реформалар, Қазақстан-2030 стратегиясы, Қазақстан-2050, бес институттық реформа және 100 нақты қадам.

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### **Демократические реформы в политическом пространстве Казахстана: последние события и вызовы**

Казахстан столкнулся с крупнейшим политическим кризисом в начале января 2022 года за более чем три десятилетия с момента обретения независимости в 1991 году. Кризис начался с протестов против роста цен на топливо, которые переросли в массовые беспорядки, за которыми последовали репрессии, после чего, наконец, все вернулось к нормальной жизни. Для президента Казахстана Касым-Жомарта Токаева это был самый большой кризис за время его президентства, но это также открывает возможности в вопросах демократических реформ в стране, поскольку он смог контролировать ситуацию. В статье основное внимание уделяется последним событиям и проблемам, которые связаны с демократическими реформами, проводимыми в Казахстане. Основной целью и задачей является обзор ключевых инициатив в направлении демократических реформ, в особенности, политических реформ, предпринятых Казахстаном как до, так и в период президентства К.-Ж. Токаева. Это связано с тем, что и президент-основатель, и действующий президент считают, что демократические реформы в политическом пространстве Казахстана необходимы, если ставится цель войти в число 30 развитых стран мира. Методы, используемые в этом исследовании, в основном включают качественные, необходимые, чтобы понять различные мнения и опыт Казахстана в его программах и инициативах демократических реформ. В статье делается вывод о том, что, несмотря на ряд мер, направленных на реализацию демократических преобразований, еще рано прогнозировать, как будут складываться демократические преобразования в политическом пространстве Казахстана.

**Ключевые слова:** политические реформы, стратегия «Казахстан-2030», стратегия «Казахстан-2050», пять институциональных реформ и 100 конкретных шагов.

#### **Introduction**

Early January 2022 saw Kazakhstan facing the biggest political crisis in over three decades since it declared independence following the Soviet collapse in 1991. It all began with protests that broke out on January 2 over rising fuel prices which escalated into widespread unrest followed by the crackdown for almost one week and finally returning back to normalcy. Experts believe that for the Kazakh President, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, this has been the biggest crisis during his presidency, but since he has been able to control the situation it also offers an opportunity. Many consider that this opportunity must be used by Tokayev to address the concerns of the people by not only continuing with democratic reforms in the socio-economic and political realms but also investigating the criminal acts and powers behind the whole episode of the crisis. After the election in June 2019 which replaced Kazakhstan's founding President Nursultan Nazarbayev with Tokayev as the second president of the country, the reform process sped up.

However, Tokayev's two and half years of presidency has been full of challenges despite his foresightedness for the country's development on the lines introduced by Nazarbayev. In addition,

as the President of Kazakhstan, he also wanted to focus on new reforms that would take into consideration "different views, one nation, strong President-effective and Parliament-accountable government" and build a "state that hears its people" (Tasci, 2021). But much of his efforts have been overshadowed by the global health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent unrest across the country. Nevertheless, major political reforms have been implemented that have transformed the country and contributed much to its ongoing democratization, which need to be relooked in order to assess the recent developments and challenges associated with it.

It is in this background that the research problem focusses on the recent developments and challenges thereof in the democratic reforms undertaken in Kazakhstan. In doing so, the main aim and objective is to review the key initiatives towards democratic reforms, especially the political reforms taken by Kazakhstan both before and during the period of Tokayev's presidency. This is so because both the founding President as well as the current President have kept in mind that democratic reforms in the political space of Kazakhstan is indispensable if this Central Asian country has to make a move into the World's top 30 most developed nations.

## Methods of Research

The methods used in this research mainly include qualitative that helped understand diverse opinions and experiences of Kazakhstan in its democratic reforms programmes and initiatives. But the comparative research method has also been used to look into the research problem both during the Nazarbayev period as well as Tokayev period. The research is based on secondary source of material in the form of articles published by the scholars and analysts in journals and on the websites. The data collected has been used to gather in-depth insight into democratic reforms in the political space of Kazakhstan and analysed from the perspectives of recent developments and challenges to reach the conclusion. The whole research study has been systematically divided and analysed under different subheadings so as to make a clear understanding of the research problem. This research is based on the hypothesis that democratic reforms in the political space of Kazakhstan has been indispensable because the country remains committed to make a move into the World's top 30 most developed nations.

### *Political Reforms in Pre-Tokayev Period*

Kazakhstan has made significant progress in implementing democratic reforms since achieving independence. Kazakhstan's democratic history has been long and uninterrupted, and as a result, the country required a strong presidential power during its early stages of establishment as a state. However, the early years of the transition period conditioned the strong presidential power. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, has remained committed to democratising its political system, including devolution of presidential powers.

The strategic paper, which was made public on January 31, 2017, centred on what former President Nazarbayev saw as the country's new, third stage of modernization. The first was the establishment of a wholly new state based on market economic principles, while the second was the realisation of Strategy 2030 and the establishment of Kazakhstan's capital, Astana. Going back to the first decade of 2000, at that time the Kazakhstani leadership announced a successful course of democratic and constitutional reforms. The country confidently carried out not only economic, but also political transformations. Kazakhstan was preparing for the chairmanship of the OSCE international organization, carried out successful constitutional reforms and reforms at the legislative level. This process is well described in a collective monograph

(Gubaidullina, 2009: 80-95). This is a joint research project by scholars from India and Kazakhstan and focuses on democratic processes in Central Asia in general and Kazakhstan in particular. It contains a detailed examination of constitutional and political systems in Kazakhstan, inter-regional cooperation between Central and South Asia.

One of the key priorities of the third modernisation was to have an accelerated technological renovation in Kazakhstan's economy (Mishra, 2018:10). That is to say that there was a need for the creation of new promising sector son the basis of digital technologies. For this purpose, emphasis was given on minimising state involvement in the economy, reducing all possible costs for businesses and developing public-private partnerships. Because the country's macroeconomic policy also required modernization, the President directed the administration to draught a strategic development plan for the country's third modernization, dubbed as "Kazakhstan's national technical initiative," that would run through 2025. This was necessary to assure Kazakhstan's long-term economic growth as well as the achievement of the Kazakhstan 2050 Strategy's major aim of reaching the world's top 30 most developed countries. During his address to the country, Nazarbayev emphasised the need to disperse powers and responsibilities across the various bodies of government. The fundamental aim was for the President to delegate some of his powers to Parliament and the government. As a result, it is crucial to look at how presidential powers were devolved in Kazakhstan prior to Tokayev through several reform measures.

### *The "Kazakhstan-2030" Strategy*

In October 1997, among the several reforms programmes the Strategy for development of the Republic of Kazakhstan until the year 2030 (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan), known as "Kazakhstan-2030" Strategy was presented. It presented a long-term plan for the country's growth, with the goal of making it one of the world's safest, most stable, ecologically sustainable states with a rapidly developing economy. It calls for the implementation of seven long-term priorities, including national security, domestic political stability, and societal consolidation; economic growth based on an open market economy with high levels of foreign investments and internal savings; Kazakhstani citizens' health, education, and well-being; power resources; infrastructure, particularly transportation and communication; and professional state. These priorities served as the foundation for the

country's medium- and long-term growth strategies. In fact, the first long-term stage of execution of the "Kazakhstan-2030" Strategy was the "Strategic plan for development to the Republic of Kazakhstan until the year 2010," approved in December 2001. The Strategic plan for development of the Republic of Kazakhstan until the year 2050 was the next step of the "Kazakhstan-2030" Strategy's implementation (Kazakhstan-2050 Strategy, 2012).

#### *The "Kazakhstan-2050" Vision*

Kazakhstan's new political course till 2050 has as its main goal joining the group of 30 most developed countries. "Eternal Kazakhstan" is the name of this project. It is a mature vision of a new age in Kazakhstan's history, which has developed its own effective development model through time. In reality, approximately 97 percent of Kazakh nationals acknowledge that the country's social-economic situation is stable and improving on a regular basis. On January 17, 2014, when making his talk on the Strategy Kazakhstan-2050 in Astana, then-President Nazarbayev said: "We've adopted Strategy-2050 so that Kazakhstan's people can hold firmly in their hands the helm of the country's future." He said that "the process of achieving the goals for 2050 will proceed against the background of intense global competition", and that "there will be no 'easy ride' in the 21st century" (Weitz, 2014). Hence, a number of challenges were needed to be addressed and prioritized as follows:

"Adjusting and strengthening the trend of innovative industrialization as well as increasing the effectiveness of traditional mining sectors.

Ensuring that the traditional industry Agriculture takes the path of innovations as the global demand for food will increase.

Developing knowledge-based economy by improving legislation on venture financing, intellectual property protection, research and innovation support, as well as commercialization of research.

Ensuring dynamic development of the infrastructure trio, i.e., Agglomerations, Transportation, and Energy to help develop the largest cities of Kazakhstan as urban centers.

Developing Small and Medium Business as the main tool for the industrial and social modernization of Kazakhstan in the 21st century.

Creating new opportunities to unleash the potential of Kazakh citizens to make them active, educated, enterprising and healthy citizens.

Improving public institutions by creating renewed instruments of interaction between the state, the non-government sector and business."

The above-mentioned priorities continued to be clear goals of Kazakhstan and its society on its way to find a place in the top 30 developed countries. But in order to translate these goals into reality, relevant legislation and concrete actions must be adopted.

Five Institutional Reforms and 100 Concrete Steps. Further, in order to strengthen the democratic credential of Kazakhstan, five institutional reforms were also identified which included the following:

Creation of a modern and professional civil service;

Ensuring the rule of law;

Industrialization and economic growth;

A unified nation for the future;

Transparency and accountability of the state (Rustam, 2015)

*The implementation of these five institutional reforms, however, called for taking targeted measures, and so the "100 concrete steps" were set out on 20 May 2015. These 100 concrete steps have further been divided into five parts under different headings so as to understand the goals clearly: Development of Professional Civil Service, Ensuring the Rule of Law, Industrialization and Economic Growth, Identity and Unity, and Establishing an Accountable State (Rustam, 2015).*

The implementation mechanisms of the 100 concrete steps under the above-mentioned heads had also been defined and it was decided to do the following:

"The National Modernization Commission under the President is established. It has five working groups, which include national and foreign experts.

The national commission should implement five institutional reforms on a step-by-step basis. It will ensure effective discussions between state agencies, the business sector and the civil society.

The national commission should adopt conceptual decisions and define concrete action plans. Its proposals will be approved by the President of Kazakhstan. Once approved, the Parliament will transform these proposals into legislation.

Efficiency of implementing key initiatives by Ministers and Akims will be thoroughly monitored by the national commission.

It is necessary to establish an international consultative council with experienced foreign experts under the national commission. This council will develop recommendations and carry out independent monitoring of reforms and their implementation.

The office of the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan will act as the working body of the national commission." (Mishra, 2019: 59)

### *Political Reforms under Tokayev*

The period of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev began with his becoming acting President of Kazakhstan on March 20, 2019 following the resignation of Nazarbayev after 29 years stay in office. Soon Tokayev was declared as a full-fledged President in the Presidential Election held on June 9, 2019. He won the election with the support of 71 percent of the voters who cast ballots. Tokayev appeared to have won by a considerable margin over six other contenders, according to the results. With 15.39 percent, Amirzhan Kossanov of the Ult Tagdyry

United National Patriotic Movement, who ran as the opposition candidate, finished in second. Daniya Yespayeva of the Ak Zhol Democratic Party received 5.32 percent, while Zhambyl Akhmetbekov of Kazakhstan's Communist People's Party received 3.86 percent and Toleutai Rakhimbekov of Kazakhstan's Auyl (Village) social democratic party received 3.03 percent. Only 1.41 percent of voters backed Amangeldy Taspikhov of the Kazakh Trade Unions Federation, while Sadibek Tugel of the Uly Dala Kyrandary National Public Association received only 0.86 percent of total votes (Astana Times, 2019).



Source: «Atameken Business», June 10, 2019.

URL: <https://inbusiness.kz/ru/news/cik-kazahstana-oglasil-okonchatelnye-itogi-prezidentskih-vyborov>

The CEC accredited 1,013 international observers to watch the election, including 866 observers from nine international organisations and 147 observers from 41 different nations. In all, 9,968

polling stations were located throughout Kazakhstan and at the country's foreign missions overseas, with 11,947,995 voters registered to vote. According to the Central Election Commission's (CEC) official

data, 77 percent of eligible voters cast ballots. The ACEC released a statement on the preliminary election results on June 10, despite the fact that the legislation required the final results to be announced within 10 days of election day. Tokayev committed to continue Nazarbayev's policies in the sectors of the country's growth, including social and economic reforms, after being completely sworn in on June 12, 2019.

On December 20, 2019, Tokayev announced a well thought plan for the major reforms in the political field. During the second meeting of the National Council of Public Trust, held in Kazakhstan's future capital, Nur Sultan, contentious themes such as public assembly were discussed. The 44-member council was established on July 17, 2019 to deal with some of the country's most acute issues. The first meeting was held on September 6, 2019. During the Council meeting President Tokayev said, "We are overcoming the fear of alternative opinion. The government does not believe that disagreement is a destructive or socially dangerous phenomenon." He also noted that the council reflects his idea of "different opinions – one nation," adding that "This is not just a slogan or idea, but a real action." (Astana Times, 2019, 9 June). Earlier, the first meeting shaped the agenda of the national council taking into account all suggestions and initiatives, in addition to launching of the relevant mechanisms and procedures.

#### *First Package of Political Reforms*

Soon after Tokayev's taking over the power Kazakhstan demonstrated its political will to achieve concrete results in an "extremely sensitive area," refuting many experts who were of the opinion that such a topic would take a back seat in the council's work. Moreover, Tokayev stressed on the need for political modernisation, which he said in his state-of-the-nation address. His first address to the nation was delivered on September 2, 2019, in which he said that "the reforms should, of course, contribute to the stable development of our country [Kazakhstan], not undermine it. We need to strengthen the creative foundation of the political processes that pluralism becomes an important element in enhancing economic well-being and human capital." However, he announced the first package of his political reforms on December 20, 2019 during the second meeting of the National Council of Public Trust entitled *Constructive Public Dialogue – the Basis of Stability and Prosperity of Kazakhstan*. It included, among the key reforms, initiatives to change the procedure for organizing

peaceful rallies or assemblies. He made it clear that as per the new law, peaceful rallies or assemblies would require notification to the relevant authorities only, rather than going through a permission process. Tokayev noted that a "culture of rallies" should be cultivated among people. "It is time for both society and the state to adequate lyre late to the public expression of position. This is inevitable and it is better to approach it on its own, consciously, and not under pressure. We need to understand that rallies are not only a right, but a responsibility," added Tokayev (Astana Times, 2019).

As described by the President the new law would "define all forms of peaceful rallies, determine the competency of local executive bodies to identify the sites and such terms as a status of an organiser, participant and observers as well as their rights and duties." The minimum number of persons required to form a political party will be cut from 40,000 to 20,000 in an effort to lower obstacles to equal political participation and improve civic engagement opportunities. Tokayev favoured the gradual change in law on parties and elections. At the same time, for the first time, he also emphasized on the need to build "a tradition of parliamentary opposition". In this context, underlining the need to expand the presence of political minorities in Kazakhstan's Parliament, he expressed the necessity "to understand that alternative opinions and public debate do not lead to stagnation, but, on the contrary, are some of the main requirements for development." (Chaudhary, 2019). In Tokayev's reforms package, political parties will now have to ensure a quota of at least 30 percent for women and youth in their lists in order to help amplify those voices in decision-making processes (Svante, 2021:9). This was necessary, as Tokayev opined, "we need to create not only social elevators for young people, but also political ones, to pass the torch of independence to new generations of patriots" (Chaudhary, 2019). Tokayev also authorised the Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs to begin procedures to join the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which aims to eliminate the death sentence. Kazakhstan has been without the death penalty since December 2003.

Highlighting the demand for further political changes, Tokayev remarked that "democracy should serve development and creativity, not estrangement and collapse. We will build our work based on the highest development goals" and that "there should be no place for populism" (Chaudhary, 2019). He further supported the idea of including civil society representatives on the boards of directors of socially

significant enterprises in the quasi-public sector. “In addition to my instruction to reduce the number of companies in the quasi-public sector, which are often staff-bloated, work needs to be done to reduce the economic involvement of active state companies in competitive markets,” said Tokayev (Satubaldina, 2019). The government has already suggested eliminating more than 100 categories of state-owned enterprise operations, though more effort was needed to put one in place, particularly in large cities with a well-developed competitive environment. In 2020, the country’s foreign worker quota was set to be decreased by 40%, from 49,000 to 29,000. The Kazakh Ministry of Labour and Social Protection found 930 infractions at 95 enterprises during inspections. The majority of the infractions involved disparities between a foreign worker’s employment and the issued permission, as well as discrepancies between education level and position. Thus, preventing discrimination against local workers by foreign employers became a priority for the government. In this regard, Tokayev clearly said that “now the Ministry of Labour will be able to quickly respond to any violations, including disproportionate wages, social conditions and soon, not all owing problems to accumulate from year to year” (Satubaldina, 2019). Within and outside Kazakhstan, Tokayev’s proposals as part of the first package of political changes were lauded and applauded.

#### *Second Package of Political Reforms*

During 2020-21, as the whole world had been suffering from COVID-19 global pandemic, certain necessary adjustments to the content and list of the first package of the proposed political reforms were made. Analysts believe that “the pandemic revealed weaknesses in the system of state power and administration and its interaction with society and institutions” (Satubaldina, 2019). This provided an extra edge to defining and implementing new set of reforms. As such, it was on September 1, 2020 that the second package of political reforms was presented by President Tokayev during his second State of the Nation Address “Kazakhstan in a new reality: time for action”.

The first and foremost, it was announced to design a new Concept for the development of local self-government and adopt a package of related laws based on the following guidelines:

Step by step separation of powers of the local government and local self-government;

Augmentation of property rights and increase in the revenues of the budgets of rural districts so as to

become the next stage in the development of “public participation budgets”;

Reinforcing control over the process of local budgets approval, that would also involve conducting a public review of crucial expenditures on infrastructure and social initiatives, including via online surveys;

Bolstering the audit commissions of maslikhats;

Enhancing the status of local community gatherings and assemblies and considering the opinions of regional maslikhats on pressing local issues for making certain decision (Reforms in Kazakhstan, 2021).

The need for direct elections of akims (mayors) of rural districts starting in 2021, as well as the drafting and implementation of the Law “On Public Control” and the establishment of a single institution for citizens to begin reforms and offer ideas, followed. The segment dedicated to the protection of human rights was a major focus. Tokayev was particularly interested in preventing cyberbullying and joining the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. He also described the tasks that must be completed to put national anti-torture legislation into compliance with the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Besides, Tokayev also announced that the practice of pre-trial investigation of criminal offenses related to human trafficking will be improved (Karin, 2021). That means the role of law enforcement agencies in such investigations was to be regulated.

*Third Package of Political Reforms.* On January 15, 2021, at the opening of the first session of the 7<sup>th</sup> Convocation of the Kazakh Parliament, Tokayev announced a third package of his political reforms. It was “a new initiative aimed at increasing the institutional development of the political system in Kazakhstan and strengthening mechanisms for protecting human rights” (Chaudhary, 2021). In particular, it contained the following measures (as it was laid out in the report by the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Republic of Croatia in “Reforms in Kazakhstan”, 2021).

Reduction in the threshold for political parties to enter the Majilis, the lower house of Parliament from 7% to 5%;

Introduction of the “None of the above” ballot option for elections of all levels;

Introduction of the elections of district akims (mayors) to build on the elections of rural akims;

Adoption of a separate law on the Human Rights Ombudsperson, defining their status, powers and

streamlining their activities in various areas and sectors;

Strengthening the office of the Commissioner of Human Rights – Ombudsman, including the establishment of regional offices;

Further improvement of the public oversight system;

Legislating online petitions;

Introduction of the Youth Development Index, which can form the basis for assessing the activities of local executive bodies in the youth policy implementation.

Expanding measures on encouraging charity, including the provision of tax and other benefits to enterprises and individuals participating in charitable events and volunteer projects.

Meanwhile, the Ombudsman for Human Rights, Elvira Azimova, has been quoted as saying that “the development and adoption of the Law ‘On the Ombudsman’ will provide certain legislative conditions both for expanding his own status and powers, and for appealing to him by concerned citizens” (Karin. 2021). It is likely that “the creation of a regional ombudsman on the ground will facilitate prompt response and action on individual situations related to specific violations of human rights”. Furthermore, the law on elections, which was signed by the Kazakh President on May 24, 2021, reflected the changes and amendments to the legislation regarding the reduction of the threshold for political parties’ passage into the Majilis and the introduction of the column “None of the above” or “against all.” It should be noted, however, that Kazakhstan received permission from India to begin the process of decentralising its power structure through direct district elections. The Indian model of power decentralisation to the district and village levels has been a huge success, attracting the attention of partner countries such as Kazakhstan. In the voting process, India had already implemented NOTA, which prompted Kazakhstan to implement “None of the Above.” The international community has also reacted positively to the dynamics and content of Kazakhstan’s ongoing political reforms. For example, during a phone call with Kazakh Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tileuberdi in April 2021, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken indicated significant support for President Tokayev’s Political Reform Plan. All of the following political reform packages, taken together, illustrate Tokayev’s persistent and comprehensive policy to improve Kazakhstan’s democratisation process in this direction.

## Conclusion

Both Nazarbayev and Tokayev, the founding President and the current President respectively, have noted that Kazakhstan cannot move into the World’s top 30 most developed nations without making serious reforms in the political space of Kazakhstan. All the reforms packages are interconnected and well in line with reforms carried out in the political and economic spheres, especially with regard to the system of local government as well as the process of total digitalization of public services. What is noteworthy is that “Tokayev introduced new institutions to oversee reforms, most notably the National Council of Public Trust, which brings together government officials and respected members of civil society”, and that “this institution, and its working groups, has been a vehicle for the generation of and deliberation on ideas for reforms” (Svante, et al,2021:7).

Yet, challenges remains there in Kazakhstan as far as continuation of democratic reforms is concerned, and recent developments in the country confirm this. While COVID pushed Kazakhstan, like other countries, to endure major hardships in 2020 and the first half of 2021, the beginning of 2022 has seen the country facing the most intense and violent protests in its 30-year history of independence. Initially erupted over the price of liquefied petroleum gas, the violence soon spread to major cities across the country and “broadened to include political demands and tense standoffs between protesters and the police” (Watters, 2022).

There are varied opinions on the overall violent unrest and the government crack-down, though some believe that there has always been an issue in the Kazakhstan’s energy sector. They think that since these incidents point to the volatility of fossil fuels and the risks of reliance on a non-renewable resource, “major reforms in energy investments in Kazakhstan are needed, not only to reform the economy, but to meet the country’s climate goals” (Watters, 2022).

Others describe the incident as “a post-COVID economic revolt that the government thought it could buy off.” (Heff&Jensen, 2020). But the protests, according to their opinion, suddenly became focused on the country’s semi-retired first president Nazarbayev and turned ugly so much so that Tokayev had to remove him from his chairmanship of the National Security Council in addition to purging Nazarbayev’s loyalists in other key positions (Heff&Jensen, 2020). Even the government resigned on January 5, 2022.



However, Tokayev claimed that unrest in Kazakhstan was due to “an invasion of bandit formations trained from abroad” and requested the assistance of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), of which Kazakhstan is a member. Though the CSTO forces helped overcome the unrest in the crisis-ridden Kazakhstan and Tokayev has now made promises for the major political changes to be announced in September 2022, his newly reshuffled government will have to face challenges in implementing the political reforms that were underway before the trouble started. So far, since the crisis has been controlled, Tokayev “has announced a series of measures aimed at winning popular support, including setting up a new fund for public good to which oligarchs and wealthy businessman will be forced to contribute.” (Walker, 2022).

In 2019, a representative of the OSCE mission noted the following: “The expectations of the Kazakh people are high that the new President will strengthen democratic institutions, implement social reforms and promote civil society development in line with OSCE commitments... It is crucially important for the leadership of the country to seize this opportunity and to advance constructive dialogue with the political actors in society as a whole” (The Astana Times, 2019, 11 June). The democratic process in Kazakhstan continues, and Kazakhstanis are looking forward to political transformation ahead of the presidential elections in November 2022. However, given the recent developments, it is imperative to wait and watch how the democratic reforms in the political space of Kazakhstan will take shape in the future.

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