




# The Presidentialization of Kazakh Political Parties

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## INTRODUCTION

The study of the party system of post-Soviet Kazakhstan is of particular importance for reasons related both to the history of this country and the peculiarities of its contemporary political development. From the period of subjugation of the Kazakh lands to the Russian Empire, which lasted for a century and a half (from the taking of Russian citizenship by Abulkhair Khan of the Junior *Zhuz* in 1731 to the capture of Shymkent and Auliye-Ata in 1864), the political life of the Kazakhs was influenced by two very different political traditions—‘nomadic,’ which reproduced the tribal institutions of governance of the Kazakh Khanate (a kind of semi-electoral monarchy) and Russian, based on the principles of administrative centralization and the role of the bureaucracy as its core. Later, after the formal incorporation of Kazakhstan into the

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Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic in 1920, the influence of the Soviet political tradition (one-party state) was added. The massive immigration of Russians and Ukrainians to Kazakhstan in the 1950s and 1960s contributed to a significant strengthening of the 'Slavic component' both demographically and culturally. Kazakhstan, actually divided into the Russian North and the Kazakh South, has become a special border area, a field of interaction and coexistence of different traditions of relations between government and citizens—endogenous and exogenous, brought and imposed from outside. The balance of these traditions was more complex than in other Soviet Central Asian republics south of Kazakhstan, and it largely predetermined the development of the political and party system of Kazakhstan after gaining independence in 1991.

The main problem of studying the political system of Kazakhstan as a whole and its party system in particular, both before and after 1991, is the question of the relationship between formal institutions and informal power networks: how formal relations of political actors reflected intra-elite, clan, and patron-client relations. When studying the Soviet period, scholars were constantly hampered by the fact that in the Soviet system as such, formal institutions only disguised the actual power structure and the real power of the Communist Party elite, which was realized through the highest party bodies. In Soviet Kazakhstan, the actual levers of control were not in the hands of its formal head (Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic) or the head of its Government, but in the hands of the party leader, the First Secretary of the Kazakh branch of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The post-Soviet political system of Kazakhstan seemed to be taking shape toward strengthening the role of formal political institutions. Political power has shifted from the highest party bodies to the executive and legislative branches of the State government. The President became the real leader of the country, and the powerless Supreme Soviet turned into a parliament. The one-party system gave way to a multi-party system. Instead of the all-powerful ruling Communist Party, several parties appeared on the political scene; in the 1990s, they were pushed to the periphery of Kazakh politics. However, if the informal mechanisms of control of the ruling party over the executive and legislative power have ceased to exist, this did not mean that the role of informal power institutions suffered the same fate. The party system was one of those areas where their influence was felt quite clearly, especially after its reshaping in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, primarily due to the

creation in 1999 of the ‘party of power’—*Nur Otan* (Radiant Fatherland), most recently renamed *Amanat* (Ancestral Will). Nevertheless, scholars have often sought to view the party system of Kazakhstan not from this point of view, but as an instrument of Nursultan Nazarbayev’s authoritarian regime (Bader, 2005; Del Sordi, 2016). On the other hand, in the early 2000s, the desire to understand more deeply how this system really works intensified. Scholars began to pay more and more attention to the key problem of analyzing the party system of Kazakhstan—the relationship and interaction of its formal and informal components, trying to determine the role of clans, inter-elite relations, as well as regional identity in the formation and operation of Kazakh political parties—not only the ruling *Nur Otan*, but also others, for example, the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (Junisbai & Junisbai, 2005).

Such interest gave rise to the search for the most relevant approach to the study of Kazakhstan’s politics. In his 2009 thesis, Rico Isaacs proposed to consider its party system within the framework provided by the theory of neo-patrimonialism, from the point of view of the interaction of formal (liberal constitutional institutions and bureaucracy) and informal components (personalism of political office, patronage and patron-client networks, factional elite conflict). According to Isaacs, it is the informal components that have shaped the institutional constraints affecting party development, the type of parties emerging and their relationship with society in Kazakhstan. He shows that relations between parties and society are very weak, the political significance of parties is determined by their role in inter-elite and inter-clan confrontation, and their structure and electoral support depend primarily on patron-client relations. Parties in Kazakhstan are not created along ethnic, religious, or racial lines, but are of an elite nature: they serve the interests of either a charismatic representative of the elite or a narrow elite group. Therefore, the party system of Kazakhstan is typical of the party systems of post-Soviet countries, which are the products of their neo-patrimonial political regimes (Isaacs, 2009, 2011). Isaacs continued to use this approach in his later papers (Isaacs, 2013, 2019; Isaacs & Whitmore, 2014).

It is difficult to disagree with the opinion about the presence of informal networks and mechanisms in the party system of post-Soviet Kazakhstan. However, having established this fact itself, we are faced with the question, how can we determine the importance of informal networks, by what way can we understand how informal mechanisms work, and is it even possible to do this? Informal institutions, by definition, are more

elusive than formal ones, in addition, when study in authoritarian regimes we have to deal with very limited and distorted information. Rico Isaacs in his study relied on extensive interviews with political actors, but how much does this kind of information, which is very subjective in nature, allow us to understand the complexity of relationships (primarily those within the elite) in the party system of Kazakhstan? Therefore, trying to penetrate as far as possible into the realm of the informal, we inevitably enter the slippery slope of assumptions and hypotheses and risk becoming prisoners of what is really nothing more than an illusion.

It is this circumstance that must be taken into account when trying to measure the degree of presidentialization of party politics in neo-patrimonial political systems, especially if we stick to the distinction between personalization and presidentialization of politics, focusing on “institutional resources, constraints, and opportunities” (Passarelli, 2015: 7). We can easily uncover underlying principles governing the formal relationships, the structuring mechanisms which regulate the internal operations of political parties. However, in such systems, the question of overcoming constitutional constraints that impede the presidentialization of parties is, at best, secondary, since the formal configuration of power relations within individual parties, as well as between parties (especially the ruling one) and the head of state may not fully correspond to the informal one. If we define party presidentialization as a process of centralization of its leadership, then how can we understand this process by studying institutional resources, constraints, and opportunities, if, for example, the real leader of the party, as, for example, in Russia, is not even a formal member of it? Therefore, any conclusions, even if they are the result of a participant observation study, will inevitably be limited.

## THE KAZAKH CONSTITUTIONAL SETTING

Since the Republic of Kazakhstan proclaimed its independence via the constitutional law ‘On State Independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan’ (*Konstitutsionnyj zakon*, 1991), the country’s political system has undergone several changes. Some researchers identify from 3 to 5 different stages of political transformation (Velikaya, 2012), but, as the purpose of this chapter is to consider the processes of political party presidency and not to provide a comprehensive analysis of political processes in Kazakhstan, our main areas of focus will be: the evolution of the institution of presidency in Kazakhstan; the formation of the party system

and electoral structure; the formation of *Otan* party (*Nur Otan*) as the official ‘party of power’ and the effects of presidentialization on pro-presidential and other parties in the country. With these objectives in mind, this chapter will focus heavily on analyzing the Constitution and its amendments, which relate to the electoral mechanism and the distribution of powers in the system of governance. The Constitution creates, supervises, and empowers the state bodies that determine the structure of state administration and is therefore closely linked to economic and social development.

From this point of view, three crucial stages can be distinguished in Kazakhstan’s political sphere until January 2022:

1. The period from 1995 to 2007, from the adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan on September 5, 1995, to the amendment of the Constitution on May 21, 2007. The formalization of the Republic of Kazakhstan as a presidential republic, the development of the party system, and the formation of a presidential majority party.
2. The period from 2007 to 2017, until the constitutional amendments of March 10, 2017. The crystallization of the super presidential republican system, the political hegemony of the presidential party, the diffusion of presidentialization to other major parties.
3. From 2017 to the present, we have been increasing the importance and control of the party system, developing a dual system of executive power or ‘meta-presidency’—completing the processes of presidentialization to complete the transition to representative democracy.

The state system of the Republic of Kazakhstan resembles an iceberg. The formal authorities of state administration comprise its surface while an informal ‘constitution,’ based on agreements and the economic and political interests of clans and elites, serves as its core. In this regard, attempts to give a detailed and complete assessment of any political processes without taking into account the ‘backstage’ of Kazakhstan’s political life face many difficulties. Many researchers argue that informal politics conducted among various ‘clans’ and ‘elites’ has a larger impact on the country’s economic and political policies than formal institutions.

Clan society is broadly acknowledged to be the functional outcome of the information and property exchange among the Kazakhs. The nomads' adjustment to the extreme living conditions was realistically possible only through the experience of successive generations over the centuries. Hence, the genealogical origin system and the genealogical organization dominated the social order system.

Kazakh society was conventionally split into three *zhuzes* (*zhuz* means 'hundred' in Kazakh): Senior, Middle, and Junior. This division was based on the genealogical seniority principle: Senior, Middle, and Junior brothers. Under this system, each *zhuz* consisted of clan groups, which, in turn, were divided into even smaller clan groupings. As a result, this clan differentiation extended to each particular individual from successive generations.

However, *zhuz*-clan in Kazakhstan never had any organizational structures, and above all was a way of thinking and a way of interpreting a person or group of persons, processes and the phenomena proceeding around, a way of elucidating and settling the processes of the society consolidation.

Positions held by *zhuz* members determined the status and influence of a particular *zhuz*, partially deifying the figure of the leader. The clan factor is still very important in modern Kazakhstan, affecting the social and political life and career path of various officials, their chances for promotion, thereby fueling their ambitions, determining the legitimacy of their role in the government, the limits of their authority, the scope for maneuver, their social circle, and the duration of their tenure in office.

Therefore, in Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev, a representative of the Senior *Zhuz*, has established a regime where the clan factor is extremely crucial for manipulating the public consciousness, personal positions, and the appointment of people in the president's interests—the most prominent and influential positions in the country have been reserved either for members of the Senior *Zhuz* (Nazarbayev's relatives) or for representatives of the Junior *Zhuz* (non-competitive candidates for the government). The most influential people of the country, taking critical decisions at the state level, are currently the closest relatives of the President or fellow members of the Senior *Zhuz*.

Thus, as an indicator of the concentration of political power in Nazarbayev's hands, the clan factor has been converted into a dominance tool and a fighting weapon in the struggle against political opponents. Furthermore, the clan factor is of paramount importance for rural and

marginalized people who have moved to cities and only think in terms of groups, clans, and ethnic units. They can only realize their personal identity within the group, through the group, and nothing else. This trend deprives such people of political will and individual stance as an independent actor in society with a discrete civil position.

In our research, we support the view of Rico Isaacs that “formal institutions complement the informal networks which underpin the power by proffering stability when they have tended towards instability” (Isaacs, 2013: 1075). This is especially true of the *Nur Otan* party, which makes the study of presidentialization even more important for understanding the development of domestic policy levers.

In a pivotal event that marked a turning point in Kazakhstan’s political life, Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan’s permanent President since 1991, announced his voluntary resignation on March 19, 2019. Following the provisions of the Constitution, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, President of the Senate, became the interim acting President. The change surprised many experts, as Nursultan Nazarbayev had been elected President five consecutive times since April 1991. Moreover, in 2007, the Constitution of Kazakhstan was amended to give Nazarbayev the exclusive right to be elected President an unlimited number of times. Based on this amendment and having observed the similar process that was going on in the Russian Federation at the time, many expected that President Nazarbayev would choose to remain in power for as long as possible. At the same time, other experts anticipated these events by analyzing the amendments and changes that had been made to legislation since late 2016. The transition to a modern distribution of the roles and functions of state bodies in Kazakhstan began on December 15, 2016, when First President Nursultan Nazarbayev, in his speech, pointed to the need for constitutional reform to “redistribute powers between the branches of government” (*Vystuplenie Glavy gosudarstva*, 2016).

While the changes to the Constitution drew immediate attention, the strengthening of state security agencies was no less important. On December 28, 2016, less than two weeks after the speech mentioned above, the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, ‘On Amendments and Additions to Certain Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Counterintelligence Activities,’ was passed.

Nazarbayev may well have drawn on the experience of Uzbekistan, where social conflicts escalated after Karimov’s death. In anticipation of the change of power in Kazakhstan, he most likely became concerned

about the country's internal stability and thus expanded the powers of law enforcement agencies.

Next, the adoption of the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 178-VI of July 5, 2018, 'On the Security Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan' (*Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan*, 2018) transformed the Security Council from an advisory body to a constitutional one. Furthermore, the law allocated part of the President's responsibilities and powers in the sphere of national security, territorial integrity, and sovereignty to the Security Council in general and to its Chairman in particular.

These laws made significant changes to some related laws, such as the Anti-Terrorism Law, the Counterintelligence Law, the Criminal Code, and the Civil Code of Kazakhstan. Most of the provisions went into effect gradually between 2017 and 2019. However, the most recent Article, 'Interaction of postal operators with bodies carrying out operative-search, counter-intelligence activities,' went into effect in January 2019, just over a month before Nazarbayev resigned. To summarize, these changes were intended to ensure that law enforcement agencies had all the necessary powers in the event of sociopolitical instability. Based on such preparations, Nazarbayev's decision to hand over power was made even before the announcement of the constitutional reforms and even before the death of Islam Karimov, the President of Uzbekistan. Although this event, and the processes that followed, had a significant impact on the way Nursultan Nazarbayev decided to transfer power and implement additional social stability, it was by no means the cause of the process, as some experts argue.

Since his resignation, Nazarbayev has not only retained informal leadership of the country but also continues to exert considerable formal influence over domestic and foreign policy. He retained for life the title of the First President and *Elbasy* (the Leader of the Nation), which, in addition to some elevated privileges, possesses also many political and legal powers enshrined in the Constitutional Law No. 83-II of July 20, 2000 'On the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan' according to which he has the right for life "under his historic mission":

1. "address the people of Kazakhstan, state bodies, and officials with initiatives on the most critical issues of state-building, domestic and foreign policy, and security of the country, which are subject to mandatory consideration by the relevant state bodies and officials."



2. “address the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan and its Chambers, at meetings of the Government of the Republic when important issues for the country are being discussed; chair the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan; chair the Security Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan; be a member of the Constitutional Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan” (*Konstitutsionnyj zakon*, 2000).

Moreover, the same Law stipulates that “initiatives developed in the main directions of the domestic and foreign policy of the state shall be agreed with the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan – *Elbasy*” (*Konstitutsionnyj zakon*, 2000). Consequently, *Elbasy*’s status allows for a type of active control over foreign and domestic policy, at least to the extent that everything happens according to the previously outlined strategy.

As stated in the Law, Nazarbayev will serve as head of the Security Council for life, which makes it necessary to agree with him on several appointments under the Presidential Decree ‘On Amendments and Additions to Certain Acts of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan’ of October 9, 2019. These include ministers (excluding foreign, defense, and interior ministers), *akims* (heads of local governments), military officials, and even members of the presidential administration (*Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan*, 2018).

Furthermore, as President for the life of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan (APK), Nazarbayev had considerable control over the appointment of the nine non-elected Majilis deputies that the Assembly proposes. However, on April 28, 2021, during the XXIX session of the APK, Nazarbayev announced that President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev had taken over the chairmanship.

Most importantly, Nazarbayev remains the Leader of the ruling *Nur Otan* party but is not a member of its electoral lists. In this regard, we can agree with Makartsev and Yusubov’s assessment that “the Chairman of the Security Council has almost all the powers to govern the country, including interaction with Parliament and the judiciary” (Makartsev & Yusubov, 2021).

Speaker Nurlan Nigmatulin, summarizing the work of Majilis in 2020, noted that “all the work of the deputy corps was focused on the implementation of strategic tasks of the First President of Kazakhstan – *Elbasy* Nursultan Nazarbayev, as well as initiatives and instructions of the head

of state Kassym-Jomart Tokayev” (*V Mazhilise podveli itogi raboty*, 2020). This quote broadly characterizes the features of power-sharing during the transfer of power; that is, there is an institution of ‘meta-presidency’ in Kazakhstan.

Based on the objectives of our study, this political situation represents a unique case where the established system of presidentialization continues to exist after the change of the formal Leader. The critical question is how the process of presidentialization will proceed after the transfer of power is completed—whether it will focus on the new Leader or maintain the informal leadership system, thereby creating a system of ‘metapresidentialization.’

According to the Constitution, Kazakhstan is a unitary state with a presidential form of Government with three independent branches of Government: the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary.

According to the Constitution, the executive branch has the most extensive powers among the branches of Government. The President determines domestic and foreign policy by issuing binding decrees and regulations. In addition, he appoints some high-ranking officials, such as ministers and *akims*, and makes the final decision on the appointment of a large number of senators (15 out of 49) and judges.

Although the 2017 constitutional reform initiated by former President Nazarbayev sought to strengthen the role of the Parliament and improve checks and balances, the executive office continues to wield broad powers.

As the highest ranking official—also known as the head of state—the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan determines the main direction of the domestic and foreign policy and represents Kazakhstan within the country and in international relations. Furthermore, the President of the Republic is a symbol of state power and unity, and the guarantor of the inviolability of the Constitution, human and civil rights, and freedoms.

Executive power is exercised by the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The Government heads the system of executive bodies and administers their activities. The Government shall be a collegial body and shall be responsible to the President of the Republic, and in cases stipulated by the Constitution, to the Majilis of the Parliament and the Parliament in all its activities. Members of the Government shall be accountable to the Chambers of Parliament in the case stipulated by Article 57, subparagraph 6 of the Constitution.

The Government is formed by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the manner prescribed by the Constitution. Legislative power is

exercised by the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which consists of two Chambers: the Senate (Upper House) and the Majilis (Lower House).

The Senate shall be composed of deputies representing, following the procedure established by constitutional Law, two from each *oblast* (region), city of republican significance, and the capital of the Republic of Kazakhstan. *Fifteen members of the Senate are appointed by the President of the Republic, taking into account the need to ensure a fair representation of the interests of society.*

The Majilis consists of one hundred and seven deputies, of whom 98 are elected by proportional election by party lists. The remaining nine are elected by the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan. Ninety-eight deputies of the Majilis are elected based on universal, equal, and direct suffrage by secret ballot. The term of office of Senate deputies is six years; the term of office of Majilis deputies is five years.

Despite the 2007 reforms in Kazakhstan, a bicameral Parliament generally exists not as an alternative to the executive branch but as an element of a unified power structure. The Parliament is “the highest representative body of the republic exercising legislative functions,” but in Kazakhstan, the Parliament was not the only legislative body in the republic.

This constitutional status of Parliament has also changed. In the old version of the Constitution, Parliament was a “representative body exercising legislative functions.” In contrast, in the new version, “the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan is the highest representative body of the Republic exercising legislative power.” It is important to note that the new Constitution strengthened the Parliament’s legislative power by no longer allowing the President to issue decrees having the force of law and waiving the Parliament’s right to delegate legislative powers to the President.

These previous functions of the President were granted to the head of state by the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 1993, which allowed Nazarbayev, in the absence of a capable Parliament, to pass over 130 decrees that eventually formed the legal framework for the state administration system in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

As a result of the 2017 Constitutional Reform, the competence of Parliament was significantly expanded by reducing the powers of the head of state. The President lost the right to issue decrees having the force of Law, and his right to the legislative initiative was limited. The strengthened role of Parliament has significantly increased the influence

of political parties. Although significant changes have been made to the highest state bodies and power has been drastically redistributed, the Republic of Kazakhstan remains a presidential republic under Article 2 of the Constitution.

Under the amended Article 65 of the Constitution, the Prime Minister makes proposals on the structure and composition of the Government only after consultation with the Majilis. The exceptions are the ministers of defense and foreign affairs, who are independently appointed by the head of state, i.e., parliamentary influence does not extend to the sphere of foreign and defense policy and the power bloc.

The President retains responsibility for foreign policy and public administration, national defense, protection of the Constitution, and ensuring effective interaction between the branches of power. The constitutional reform has resulted in the Government having full responsibility for the state of affairs in the socioeconomic sphere while making the necessary decisions within the policy framework defined by the head of state. In effect, this means that there are two officials with supreme executive powers: the President and the Prime Minister.

The increased powers of Parliament also relate to the accountability of the Government of Kazakhstan and give the right to remove ministers from office, thereby strengthening the accountability of the executive branch not only to the President but also to Parliament. By a majority vote, each chamber of Parliament may accept an appeal to the President to remove a minister from office by a majority vote (not less than 2/3 of the total number of deputies). The role of Parliament is also strengthened here at the expense of the President because, after the amendment, he has lost his veto power in this matter and is obliged to accept the decision of Parliament and dismiss the members of the Government. The constitutional mechanism for a vote of no confidence in the members of the supreme executive is a significant factor in the development of parliamentary control.

Moreover, the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan has begun to exercise more control in government appointments, exemplified by the Senate's confirmation of the Prosecutor General, the Chairman of the National Bank, and the Chairman of the National Security Committee. In the context of increased powers for the legislature, eliminating the President's right to declare a draft law urgent was a positive development. Parliamentarians repeatedly criticized this right, as it did not always allow for a comprehensive examination and reflection of the relevant draft

laws. The amendments had strengthened Parliament's responsibility for adopting quality laws. However, the head of state retained the right to determine the priority of adopting draft laws in Parliament. The new version of this provision reads as follows: "The President of the Republic has the power to prioritize the consideration of draft laws, meaning that the relevant bills must be passed as a matter of priority within two months" (*Konstitutsiya Respubliki Kazakhstan*, 1995).

The constitutional reform that has taken place in Kazakhstan has significantly increased the role of the Government, strengthened the status of Parliament, and ultimately increased the role of its political component and, as a consequence, of the parliamentary majority party.

In preparation for the planned resignation of President Nazarbayev, the Constitutional Law of September 28, 1995, on Elections in the Republic of Kazakhstan, was amended. In the new edition, which took effect on June 15, 2017, the amount of work experience in public administration required to run for President increased: 'To be elected President, a citizen must meet the requirements set out in Article 41(2) of the Constitution, have at least five years of experience in public service or elected public office, and have active suffrage per Article 33(2) and (3) of the Constitution and this Constitutional Law' (*Konstitutsionnyj zakon*, 1995).

Thus, only candidates who understood how the state apparatus worked and had experience with the system could run for the country's highest office, eliminating the possibility of popular independent candidates registering. In February 2019, in anticipation of his resignation, President Nazarbayev dismissed the Government of Kazakhstan. In order to clarify the constitutional possibility of a voluntary resignation, the Constitutional Council of Kazakhstan was asked on February 4, 2019, whether the established clause. 3 of Article 42 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan was an exhaustive list of grounds for the early termination of the President's powers. The Constitutional Council clarified that the list of grounds for early termination of the President's powers in the said provision is not exhaustive because:

The right of the Head of State to resign is derived from the Basic Law. This right is an element of the presidential form of Government and the country's President's constitutional status. It belongs to the President both as a human being and as a citizen of Kazakhstan, and also follows from other provisions of the Constitution which enshrine the constitutional rights of

every individual, in particular, freedom of labor, free choice of occupation, and profession. (Vaal', 2019)

In May 2020, the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan adopted the Constitutional Law 'On Amendments to the Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan *On Elections in the Republic of Kazakhstan*,' which introduced many new amendments to the current electoral legislation. Thus, under the new amendments, additions were made to article 89, 'Registration of candidates for deputies to the Majilis,' under which only one list from each political party with candidates not exceeding the established number of mandated deputies distributed among political parties by thirty percent was allowed for registration. At the same time, for the first time, the Law introduced quotas by gender and age: "The number of persons under twenty-nine years of age and women on a party list must be at least thirty percent of the total number of persons on the list."

The same provision has been introduced in Article 104(4) of the Constitutional Law 'On Elections' on registration of party lists of candidates for members of maslikhats: "Only one list from a single political party, in which the number of women and persons under the age of twenty-nine must be at least thirty percent of the total number of persons included, may be registered in a territorial constituency."

Furthermore, Article 15.1 states that "When approving party lists of candidates for deputies, a political party shall ensure that persons under twenty-nine years of age and women comprise at least thirty percent of the total number of candidates on the lists."

These changes confirmed President Tokayev's promise further to democratize the electoral process in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The adoption of the Law 'On Amendments and Additions to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan *On Committees and Commissions of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan*' should also be attributed to this process. According to the introduced amendments: "The parliamentary opposition has the right to nominate from among its deputies candidates for the positions of chairpersons of permanent committees of the Majilis of the Parliament. The Chairman of one of the Standing Committees of the Majilis of the Parliament shall be elected from among the deputies nominated by the parliamentary opposition" (*O vnesenii izmeneniya i dopolnenij*, 2020).

Also, “The parliamentary opposition has the right to nominate from among its deputies candidates for the positions of secretaries of permanent committees of the Majilis of the Parliament. Secretaries of the two Standing Committees of the Majilis of the Parliament shall be elected from among the deputies nominated by the parliamentary opposition” (*O vnesenii izmeneniya i dopolnenij*, 2020).

On October 21, 2020, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev scheduled 98 directly elected seats in the lower house of Parliament (Majilis) for January 10, 2021. These were the first parliamentary elections since 2005, held after a full five-year parliamentary term. Simultaneously, elections were also held for 216 local *maslikhats* at the regional and district levels.

Five of the six officially registered political parties—the Communist People’s Party of Kazakhstan (CPPK), *Nur Otan*, *Ak Zhol*, *Auyl*, and *Adal*—participated. The election results confirmed the stability of party representation in Kazakhstan’s electoral system. As in the two previous parliamentary elections, only three parties—*Nur Otan*, *Ak Zhol*, and the CPPK—won the Majilis. At that, the Kazakh scientists note that in this established scheme, the *Nur Otan* party occupies the position in the ‘center,’ CPPK—the ‘left,’ *Ak Zhol* party—the ‘right.’

Many experts considered the existing Nazarbayev–Tokayev dichotomy in terms of competition and ‘duality of power.’ However, this view is objectively inconsistent with the nature of their interaction.

*Elbasy* Nazarbayev, as Chairman of the ruling party and the Security Council, controlled the overall political system through security structures and maintained a dominant position in the vast informal system of power. In many ways, this advisory role was similar to that exercised by Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore, after his resignation. His main task was to ensure continuity in power transfer by institutionalizing a party system that will serve as a deterrent and control factor for informal elites. The combination of the First President’s charisma and experience made him an indispensable arbiter of relations between business groups. It ensured that critical partners, such as Russia and China, viewed Kazakhstan’s domestic and foreign policies as stable.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev is very different from his predecessor. After the announcement of Nazarbayev’s resignation, many opinions circulated among experts and journalists, but the most popular were that Tokayev lacked the charisma of the First President and that it was a ‘convenient choice.’ It was assumed that Tokayev who is a more conformist *apparatchik* (bureaucrat) than the reformer (Lillis, 2019)

would be an unquestioning exponent of Nursultan Nazarbayev's strategic and operational vision.

However, in just two years since he was elected, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev earned a reputation for doing what he promised. 'If permitted,' Kate Mallinson wrote in 2019, "Tokayev could seek to restore faith in the constitution and government by showing that he is able to implement genuine change, even if this occurs on a piecemeal basis' (Mallinson, 2019: 22).

The dynamics of relations between the president and the 'party of power' and presidentialization processes showed what roles Nazarbayev and Tokayev really played in the system of power during the transition period. Based on the processes of reform preparation and implementation, it can be concluded that the very personal qualities and experience of state governance that allowed Nazarbayev to effectively combine governing the country, limiting the role of informal elites, and maintaining close relations with the leaders of the Russian Federation and China imposed too many limitations on him when gradual reforms were needed.

## THE GENETIC FEATURES OF KAZAKH PARTIES

When considering the presidentialization of the ruling *Nur Otan* party, the dynamics of this process under President Nazarbayev, and possible changes under President Tokayev, it is necessary to view presidentialization in the context of Kazakhstan's political sphere.

For this, we turn to the classic work of Poguntke and Webb (2005), who define presidentialization as "a process by which regimes are becoming more presidential in their actual practice without, in most cases, changing their formal structure, that is, their regime-type."

Looking at Kazakhstan's system of government after the constitutional reforms of 2017 and the further redistribution of presidential functions, the question arises—is Kazakhstan a presidential republic?

Poguntke and Webb's (2005) analysis of the classification of regimes allows us to assess this. According to the researchers, presidential systems provide the leader of the executive branch with significant resources. However, he remains independent from the Parliament and party politics. This peculiar separation constitutes one of the fundamental characteristics of presidential republics (Poguntke & Webb, 2005).

*Capabilities of the executive branch.* In presidential forms of government, the president's resources in the realm of the executive are virtually



unlimited. He is not held accountable directly to Parliament, but to the people who elected him and can form the executive's cabinet virtually alone, while the function of the Parliament is more of an advisory one. Therefore, in a presidential republic, the President can govern as effectively as possible. A necessary clarification is that the parliament's ability to impeach the President is not a function of control and responsibility.

As a result of the separation of branches of power, the President is *autonomous*, primarily from his party. The transition from party candidate to incumbent President significantly weakens (at least formally) the web of commitment that is inherent in party politics. However, the process can be reciprocal—the presidential party does not have to support government strategy if it represents a majority or represents itself as a viable minority opposition. Consequently, this managerial autonomy is directly dependent on the political conjuncture and the authority of the elected president.

This phenomenon is defined as the 'personalization of the electoral process' which implies that all aspects of the electoral process are decisively shaped by the personalities of leading candidates and their electoral appeal. In other words, leadership autonomy can contribute to leadership power, but it depends on electoral success (Poguntke & Webb, 2005).

Thus, in practical application, presidentialization is, on the one hand, characterized by increased power, empowerment, and autonomy of leadership, both within the party and within the executive branch, and on the other by an increasingly personal leadership-oriented electoral processes. Transposing the process of presidentialization to existing political and electoral processes has highlighted the three components of presidentialization—'the executive face, the party face, and the electoral face' (Poguntke & Webb, 2005), and presidentialization as a process means strengthening the influence of these factors beyond the formally defined (in a given political system) context.

However, much of our research is also comparable to the alternative concept of Samuels and Shugart (2010: 6). They define presidentialization as 'the way the separation of powers fundamentally shapes parties' organizational and behavioral characteristics, in ways that are distinct from the organization and behavior of parties in parliamentary systems.' The Samuels and Shugart approach consider regime type an independent variable and party structure as a dependent variable. First and foremost, the above definition and the process of presidentialization apply to presidential forms of Government. Since the political system of the Republic of

Kazakhstan is distinctly presidential, one might assume that this allows us to take certain concepts from the two viewpoints and use them to better understand the processes of presidentialization in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

However, we agree with Gianluca Passarelli (2015) that ‘The differences between these theoretical approaches implies analogous distinctions in terms of meaning conferred to concepts, such as personalization, centralization of politics, and of course presidentialization itself. Those differences are not merely semantic but are substantial, due to their empirical and theoretical consequences.’

Based on the characteristics of the political regime of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the first approach (Poguntke & Webb, 2005) allows us to approach the process of presidentialization from a historical perspective. Considering the overarching role played by the First President Nazarbayev in the executive branch and the *Nur Otan* party in party processes and the length of time they have continuously interacted (over 20 years), a broader approach to the analysis seems more appropriate.

As Elgie and Passarelli (2019: 7–8) have noted, “Poguntke and Webb’s account of presidentialisation itself is no less grand. It includes consideration not just of the organization of decision-making within the executive branch but also party politics and election campaigning. Here, they are very explicit that developments in one of these three faces of presidentialisation can affect the other.... account of presidentialisation as a grand historical narrative ... takes on a different form ... the value of this type of study lies in the identification of a long-term process of political change.”

A typical feature of the development of Kazakhstan’s political landscape from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s was the insignificant role of party leaders and organizations in the political structure of the country.

### *Stage 1: Formation of the RPP Otan as the Party of the President*

In Kazakhstan, the presidentialization of political parties and the formation of a modern party system, with the *Nur Otan* party being the dominant one, began with the amendments to the Constitution of October 7, 1998. These amendments changed the electoral system and the composition of Parliament by establishing a mixed electoral system. According to this amendment, 10 out of 77 deputies of the Majilis were elected from proportional electoral lists, while the remaining 66 deputies were elected from single-member territorial constituencies. An additional

provision established a 7 percent threshold for the proportional system for parties.

This change led to a need for parties to unite and form more pronounced party structures, electoral programs, and extensive campaigning. In response to these changes, several new parties have emerged in Kazakhstan:

- the Civic Party of Kazakhstan (CP), founded in November 1998;
- the Agrarian Party of Kazakhstan (APK), founded in January 1999;
- the *Otan* Republican Political Party, founded in January 1999;
- the Peasant Social Democratic Party *Auyl*, founded in January 2000;
- the Party of Patriots of Kazakhstan (PPK), founded in July 2000;
- the *Ak Zhol* Democratic Party, founded in March 2002.

The results of the 1999 parliamentary elections showed that the *Otan* party turned out to be the most adapted to the new version of party system, which arose as a result of the creation of a coalition of pro-government parties rallying around the Republican Public HQ in support of presidential candidate Nazarbayev in the 1999 presidential elections. It won 23 of the 77 seats in the Majilis, but the authentic representation was higher, as some self-nominated candidates were also affiliated with this political force (Table 3.1).

The *Otan* party's formation, in which incumbent President Nursultan Nazarbayev assumed the chairmanship, can be considered the beginning of the presidentialization of political parties. Since 1991, President Nazarbayev had not given particular preference to any political parties operating in the country. Therefore, given his political weight, this direct interest in the *Otan* has elevated the party to a critical player in the political arena of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

### *Stage 2: Strengthening the Political Influence of the RPP Otan*

Further institutionalization of the party system took place after President Nazarbayev signed Law No. 344-II of July 15, 2002, on Political Parties (July 15, 2002), which redefined the status and powers of political parties but also significantly raised the requirements for registration of political associations (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2002):

**Table 3.1** 1999 parliamentary elections

<i>Party</i>	<i>Party list</i>	<i>Single-member constituency</i>	<i>Final seats in the Majilis</i>
<i>Otan</i>	4	19	23
Self-nominated candidates	–	23	23
CP	2	11	13
Federation of Trade Unions of Kazakhstan	0	11	11
Communist Party of Kazakhstan (CPK)	2	1	3
APK	2	1	3
People's Cooperative Party of Kazakhstan	0	0	0
<i>Azamat</i> Democratic Party	0	0	0
Congressional Party of Kazakhstan	0	0	0
<i>Alash</i>	0	0	0
Kazakhstan Renaissance Party	0	0	0
Republican Labor Party	0	0	0

Source <https://www.election.gov.kz/eng/>

*2.1 A political party shall be created on the initiative of a group of citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan numbering not less than one thousand persons, convening a constituent congress (conference) of a political party, and representing two-thirds of the regions, cities of republican significance and the capital.*

...

*10.6 For state registration of a political party, there must be at least **forty thousand party members** representing the structural subdivisions (branches and representative offices) of the party in all regions, cities of republican significance, and the capital (17 – **author's note**), with at least **six hundred party members** in each of them.*

...

*10.4. lists of the members of a political party in electronic and paper form as prescribed by the registering authority and as required by paragraph 6 of this Article;*

Such sweeping requirements required a rapid and orderly expansion of both administrative and territorial party representation, which not all could do. Only a third of the parties operating at the time were

able to cope with the registration requirements. These included the pro-government parties *Otan*, the APK, and the CP and the opposition parties the PPK, the *Ak Zhol*, the *Auyl*, and the CPK.

However, further formalization of the party system had attracted new political actors and led to the creation of new political parties:

- the *Asar* Republican Party, established in November 2003;
- the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DCK), established in February 2004;
- the CPPK, which split from the CPK in June 2004.

In the parliamentary elections of 2004, 10 out of 77 seats in the Majilis were elected based on party lists under the proportional representation system. Eight political parties and two-party blocs registered by the Central Election Commission (CEC) competed for these ten seats. The remaining 67 seats in the Majilis were elected in single-mandate constituencies. As of August 18 (one day before the start of the official campaign), the CEC had registered a total of 623 candidates in 67 single-mandate constituencies and 106 candidates on party lists.

The 2004 parliamentary elections again demonstrated the political superiority of the *Otan*, which managed to win 42 seats out of 77 in the Majilis, securing for the first time an absolute majority (Table 3.2).

### *Phase 3: Establishing Nur Otan as the Dominant Political Force in Kazakhstan*

On June 19, 2007, the Election Law was amended, mainly to reflect relevant changes in the Constitution and to define a new electoral system. On June 20, the President dissolved the lower house of Parliament and scheduled early elections to the Majilis for August 18.

Constitutional amendments introduced in 2007 significantly strengthened the role of the Parliament and, through it, the role of political parties. Following the adoption of these constitutional amendments, the Parliament of Kazakhstan was given the opportunity to participate in the formation and oversight of the Government and to approve two-thirds of the Constitutional Council, the CEC, and the Accounts Committee to oversee the execution of the national budget.

**Table 3.2** 2004  
parliamentary elections

<i>Party</i>	<i>Party list</i>	<i>Single-member constituency</i>	<i>Final seats in the Majilis</i>
<i>Otan</i>	7	35	42
Self-nominated candidates	–	18	18
APK/CP coalition	1	10	11
<i>Asar</i>	1	3	4
<i>Ak Zhol</i>	1	0	1
Democratic Party	0	1	1
CPK/DCK coalition	0	0	0
<i>Auyl</i>	0	0	0
PPK	0	0	0
CPPK	0	0	0
<i>Rukhaniyat</i>	0	0	0

Among the constitutional amendments were other changes of direct relevance to elections:

- removal of the limit on the number of terms in office for the First President of Kazakhstan;
- reduction of the President's term of office from 7 to 5 years (at the end of the incumbent's mandate);
- allowing the President to participate in the activities of political parties while in office;
- changes to the way the CEC will be constituted in the future;
- deletion of provisions on the Majilis election system so that the Election Law defines the electoral system;
- an increase in the number of senators appointed by the President from seven to fifteen;
- requiring MPs to have resided permanently in Kazakhstan for the past ten years;
- removing the provision prohibiting imperative mandates for parliamentarians and introducing imperative mandates providing that Majilis deputies lose their mandates if they resign or are expelled

from the party in whose name they were elected, or if the party ceases its activities (OSCE, 2007).

The election of Majilis deputies began to be conducted on a proportional basis. To this end, the number of deputies in the Majilis was increased from 77 to 107, of whom 98 are elected by party lists; the remaining nine are elected by the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan, thus obtaining the legal status and powers enshrined in the Constitution.

Taken together, these amendments significantly increased the role of political parties and consequently that of parliamentarians. For the first time in the history of independent Kazakhstan, the Government's responsibility toward the President and Parliament was clearly established. Under the adopted amendments, a new government mechanism based on a parliamentary majority began to operate. The Majilis assumed a leading role in approving the Prime Minister of Parliament. The Prime Minister was obliged to raise before the newly elected Majilis the confidence in the Government.

The *Otan* party was undoubtedly anticipating these changes. *Asar* merged with *Otan* in June 2006 and was followed in late 2006 by the *APK* and the *CP*. As a result of the merger, the *Otan* party was reformed and renamed the *Nur Otan* People's Democratic Party.

Some parties followed a similar strategy with the opposition party *Nagyż Ak Zhol* joining the newly registered Nationwide Social Democratic Party (NSDP) in late June 2007 and *Ak Zhol* merging with *Adilet* in July. In protest to the changes in the electoral system, the CPK did not nominate candidates for the Majilis elections.

In light of the development of the party's presidentialization, it is important to note that the requirement that the President not be active in a political party for the period of his powers has been removed from the Constitution. In this way, Nursultan Nazarbayev secured formal and de facto membership and chairmanship of the party.

During this period, the only new party was the NSDP, established in September 2006 and successfully registered with the Ministry of Justice in January 2007.

The 2007 elections showed that the formation of the *Nur Otan* party bore fruit: it received 88.4 percent of the vote and, as no other party passed the 7 percent threshold, won all 98 elected seats in the Majilis (Table 3.3).

**Table 3.3** 2007  
parliamentary elections

<i>Party</i>	<i>Percentage of votes received (%)</i>	<i>Final seats in the Majilis</i>
<i>Nur Otan</i>	88.41	98
NSDP	4.54	0
<i>Ak Zhol</i>	3.09	0
<i>Auyl</i>	1.51	0
CPPK	1.29	0
PPK	0.78	0
<i>Rukhaniyat</i>	0.37	0

Source <https://www.election.gov.kz/eng/>

Despite this political success, it quickly became apparent that the winning of all seats in Parliament by the party of power was far worse than getting an absolute majority of seats, as it left no room to maneuver. Consequently, as early as February 2009, amendments to the laws ‘On Elections’ and ‘On Political Parties’ were adopted, which stated that part of the parliamentary mandates would be distributed to the party that comes second in the parliamentary elections, even if it did not get the necessary number of votes to pass the threshold.

These changes have affected representation in the Majilis and the *maslikhats*, eliminating the possibility of only one party being represented in any *maslikhat* (regional, city, district). It ensures that there is a party alternative for voters.

#### *Phase 4: Consolidation of the Party System of the Republic of Kazakhstan in a 1+2 Format*

Throughout the three subsequent parliamentary elections (2012; 2016; 2021), *Nur Otan* has maintained its undisputed lead (80.99%; 82.2%; 71.09%), but at the same time, opposition (the *Ak Zhol* and CPPK) retained its parliamentary representation (Table 3.4).

On August 3, 2015, at the request of the Ministry of Justice of Kazakhstan, the Special Inter-District Economic Court of Almaty ordered the dissolution of the CPK because the party no longer met the requirements for party registration. The court decision was followed by the suspension of the party’s activities during the 2015 presidential election when the party was given three months to rectify the registration discrepancies identified by the Ministry of Justice.



**Table 3.4** 2012  
parliamentary elections

<i>Party</i>	<i>Percentage of votes received (%)</i>	<i>Final seats in the Majilis</i>
<i>Nur Otan</i>	80.99	83
<i>Ak Zhol</i>	7.47	8
CPPK	7.19	7
NSDP	1.68	0
<i>Auyl</i>	1.19	0
PPK	0.83	0
<i>Adilet</i>	0.66	0

Source <https://www.election.gov.kz/eng/>

On January 13, 2016, members of the Majilis unanimously addressed President Nazarbayev, requesting the early dissolution of Parliament. A week later, the President called early parliamentary elections for March 20, which were held in conjunction with the local elections. On January 18, 2016, the Speaker of the Majilis stated that “... it is crucially important that the parties receive a new mandate of voter confidence. Secondly, during this crucial time, a broad public consolidation is necessary to implement anti-crisis measures effectively. Only the unity and coherence of actions will enable us to sustain the new economic shocks. Thirdly, to synchronize our actions for implementation of the reforms at all levels, it is necessary to combine the elections in the Parliament with the elections of the local *maslikhats*” (Statement by deputies with initiative to hold snap elections in Majilis 2016).

Following the 2016 parliamentary elections, three political parties won mandates—the *Nur Otan* with a majority of 84 seats, followed by the *Ak Zhol* Democratic Party and CPPK, each with seven seats. The three other political parties running, which did not win any seats, were the *Birlik* party (Table 3.5), the People’s Democratic Patriotic Party *Auyl*, and the NSDP.

To register for the 2021 elections, the CEC required parties with less than seven percent of the vote in the previous parliamentary election to pay an electoral deposit of 637,500 tenge (approximately €1,250) for each candidate on their list. Only two parties contested most of the available seats—the *Nur Otan* nominated 126 candidates, while CPPK nominated 113. The *Ak Zhol* ran with 38 candidates, *Auyl* with 19, and *Adal* with 16, which deprived them of any hope of claiming a majority in

**Table 3.5** 2016  
parliamentary elections

<i>Party</i>	<i>Percentage of votes received (%)</i>	<i>Final seats in the Majilis</i>
<i>Nur Otan</i>	82.2	84
<i>Ak Zhol</i>	7.18	7
CPPK	7.14	7
<i>Auyl</i>	2.01	0
NSDP	3.57	0
<i>Birlik</i>	0.29	0

Source <https://www.election.gov.kz/cng/>

Parliament. Overall, party lists included 34 incumbent deputies from the outgoing Majilis.

In a significant development, the *Nur Otan* held primary elections to form a party list, nominating 77 candidates. Other parties used a combination of nominations by regional branches and central quotas for their candidate lists.

Throughout the campaign, all political parties supported the policies of the President and the First President, and none challenged the dominance of the *Nur Otan* party. As a result, the campaign was uncompetitive, and voters were offered few natural political alternatives. Party campaigning was highly centralized, with an emphasis on party leaders; in the case of the *Nur Otan*, the party leaders were not candidates.

After the 2021 parliamentary elections, the same three political parties won mandates—the *Nur Otan* with a reduced but significant majority of 76 seats, followed by the Democratic Party *Ak Zhol* and the CPPK, with 12 and 10 seats, respectively. The three other political parties that did not win any seats are the *Birlik* party, the People's Democratic Patriotic Party *Auyl*, and the NSDP (Table 3.6). In November 2020, the *Birlik* and CPPK changed their names to *Adal* and the People's Party of Kazakhstan, respectively.

### *Prospects for the Development of Kazakhstan's Party System*

To remain active, parties must meet several quantitative and territorial representation requirements. A party must have 17 branches, i.e., in each territorial constituency, with at least 600 active members in each. In addition, until 2020, there was a provision for a minimum of 40,000 party members.

**Table 3.6** 2021  
parliamentary elections

<i>Party</i>	<i>Percentage of votes received (%)</i>	<i>Final seats in the Majilis</i>
<i>Nur Otan</i>	71.09	76
<i>Ak Zhol</i>	10.95	12
People's Party of Kazakhstan (PPK)	9.10	10
<i>Amyl</i>	5.29	0
<i>Adal</i>	3.57	0

Source <https://www.election.gov.kz/eng/>

A significant number of global experts (primarily from the OSCE) have pointed out that the requirements for registration of political parties are stringent, preventing new parties from developing. The 2020 amendments to the Law on Political Parties were a definite response to this criticism, reducing the number of members required for registration from 40,000 to 20,000. However, no new political parties have been registered since 2013 (out of 9 submitted) despite this reduction.

Although applicants for the status of the party managed to collect 20,000 signatures, none of them could fulfill the requirements to establish an initiative committee. Furthermore, the constituent congress stage, which at least 1,000 people must attend, also proved insurmountable.

The main reason that new parties in Kazakhstan failed to register was not that they were actively prevented from doing so but that there were no objective prerequisites for this yet. To date, the political sphere in Kazakhstan has a 'zero-sum' quality. During the transit of power, there was a certain 'credit of trust' for the new leadership, which, despite the rather heavy influence of the 'coronacrisis,' had not yet been exhausted, moreover, the political influence and support of *Elbasy* also played an important role in the eyes of voters. This means that if the new party were pro-government, it would have no chance of successfully competing with the *Nur Otan* party, just like the other two parties of the current parliament, which represent the loyal opposition. For the emergence of strong radical opposition parties, as it seemed until recently, social, political, ethnic or ideological conflicts were not strong enough. Of course, it was possible to notice a number of signs of increasing tensions. However, no alternative political force or social movement had a sufficiently sound agenda or the political resources to meet the selection and registration criteria allowing them to pass the 7% parliamentary selection threshold.

How feasible is it to engage in full-fledged political activity when your chances of getting into the current Parliament are close to zero? For most would-be politicians, the answer is that it is not feasible. Especially, when a significant part of the political sphere is ‘in the shadows’, turning your resources to this direction will bring much more potential benefit, including promoting reform ideas.

The parties in Kazakhstan are personified by their leaders. There are fears that if individual party leaders leave, the parties themselves will cease to exist, as the party system is quite conservative regarding party leadership rotation. Another problem is competition within parties, potentially leading to ‘chieftaincy’ and internal party splits.

Following the ‘genetic model’ (Panebianco, 1988: 50), the analysis of the dynamics of presidentialization of the *Nur Otan* party is based on three main generic features:

1. the party’s construction and development;
2. the presence or the absence (at the party’s origin) of an external ‘sponsor’;
3. the role of charisma in the party’s formation.

In the last decade, the political relations between President Nazarbayev and the party of power shifted from personalization of politics to presidentialization of politics with a clear intent to form the institutional resources, constraints, and opportunities.

Independent of the distinctions between regimes, ‘centralized’ parties that are cohesive, disciplined, without factions, and a leadership that is ‘independent’ from the organization (for extra-political or statutory resources) will be more suitable for increasing levels of presidentialization (Passarelli, 2015).

### NUR OTAN, PRESIDENTIALIZATION, AND INFORMAL NETWORKS

Many researchers of political systems in Central Asia point out that parties are not the main political actors (Isaacs & Whitmore, 2014; Reuter & Remington, 2009). Financial and industrial groups often play this role, being led by well-known representatives of elites’ specific categories

who cooperate and compete with each other to advance their interests (Junisbai, 2010; Junisbai & Junisbai, 2019).

In his article, Stanislav Shkel (2019) provided a detailed analysis of the informal patrimonial ties relationships to formal political institutions and the inevitability of increased personalization of politics in such a political environment. Understanding the informal aspects and levers of politics in Kazakhstan allowed Nursultan Nazarbayev to build a relatively stable political system resulting from the formal and informal systems interdependence.

Political patronage systems require money and direct personal connections with those in power to ‘move up,’ whether one is seeking a high-level political appointment, lucrative business opportunities, or a senior position in the government bureaucracy.

The Kazakh state and society social boundaries not the least informal groups often blur. In Kazakhstan, the state plays a significant role in the civil society organizations’ creation, and activities (including funding). Accordingly, the state encourages those organizations that implement ‘useful’ activities by providing funding, grants, or other support while limiting those organizations that may somehow challenge the state or its leaders’ priorities.

In Kazakhstan, President Nursultan Nazarbayev acted as both formal and informal hierarchies’ apex, locking in formal institutions and informal patronage systems. At the same time, Kazakhstan’s political regime stability largely depended on Nazarbayev’s willingness to sacrifice his clan or relatives’ interests for the sake of his personal influence expanding. System stability could only be achieved by maintaining a balance of elite power and loyalty (Isaacs, 2010).

The only significant party in Kazakhstan, being formed on the personal leadership principle, is *Nur Otan*. The informal systems peculiarities hierarchy appear when the presence of several opposing ‘groups of influence’ in the political field inevitably led to a conflict of interest. The ruling party served as a platform for negotiation and mobilization of elites, but it had no meaningful political will beyond its leader’s will (Isaacs & Whitmore, 2014).

Nevertheless, during the political system formation, individual parties played a significant role in informal leadership strategies. They served as a platform for articulating and representing informal elite groups’ political and economic interests.

Based on archival data and interviews with event participants, Isaacs (2020) describes in detail two such parties in Kazakhstan—the CP (1998–2006) and the *Asar* Republican Party (2003–2004). Despite the pro-presidential rhetoric, each of these parties was created to lobby a particular financial and industrial group interests (the Eurasian Natural Resources Corporation for the CP and Nazarbayev/his son-in-law Rakhat Aliyev for the *Asar*). Such a development posed a threat to the informal system stability, which forced its leader to act decisively.

The President of Kazakhstan had already formed the ruling *Otan* party and managed to secure its absolute electoral dominance by 2004. To prevent his informal influence weakening, in 2006, Nursultan Nazarbayev initiated the *Otan*, *Asar*, and CP merger into a single ruling party, *Nur Otan*.

At the same time, amendments to the constitution were adopted to abolish restrictions on civil servants joining parties. Thus, the *Nur Otan* membership became the key to gaining public office and service access.

After the new Party Law version, which made it more challenging to form new parties, and after adopting a proportional electoral system with a high electoral threshold of 7%, no other party could compete with the *Nur Otan*. Thus, the representation of the interests of financial and industrial groups was introduced into the system of the ruling party.

In May 2008, another meaningful change occurred—President Nazarbayev’s establishment of the ruling party’s youth wing—*Zhas Otan* (Young Fatherland). The President pretty clearly expressed this association’s objectives at the first congress: “the *Zhas Otan* is a movement involving thousands of active, educated patriots, who support all my initiatives, strategic plans being my policy’s conductors” (*Strategiya Molodezhnogo kryla*, 2013).

Thus, through the *Zhas Otan*, there was an expansion of the party *Nur Otan*’s social base as part of a more extensive program for the formation of the ‘Nazarbayev generation’. The key idea is that the new political elite generation representatives will be able to make significant changes in informal elites’ structure while maintaining loyalty to Nazarbayev as their patron and the system that gave birth to them.

In 2020 before the parliamentary election, Nazarbayev, preparing the elite rotation, made it clear that he wanted to see significant changes in the presidential-party personal composition, primarily its rejuvenation. These forced changes aim to maintain the same balance between informal

patronage and formal development of political traditions in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Before examining how presidentialization has evolved since the change of power in the Republic of Kazakhstan, it is worth taking a closer look at a few minor reforms that have taken place since 2019, which were mentioned earlier in the text.

The first reform worth noting is the adoption of amendments to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, ‘On Committees and Commissions of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan,’ concerning the parliamentary opposition. According to the amendments of June 2, 2020: “The parliamentary opposition has the right to nominate candidates for the positions of chairpersons of the standing committees of the Majilis of the Parliament from among its deputies. The Chairman of one of the Standing Committees of the Majilis of the Parliament shall be elected from among the deputies nominated by the parliamentary opposition” (*O vnesenii izmeneniya i dopolnenij*, 2020). And further: “The parliamentary opposition shall have the right to nominate candidates for the secretaries of permanent committees of the Majilis of the Parliament from among their deputies. Secretaries of two standing committees of the Majilis of the Parliament shall be elected from among the deputies nominated by the parliamentary opposition” (*O vnesenii izmeneniya i dopolnenij*, 2020).

Second, the *Nur Otan* held internal party elections, the first in the history of the party-political development of the country, on a nationwide scale. This was one of the final stages of the ‘reset’ of the party initiated by *Elbasy*. According to the Deputy Chairman of the *Nur Otan* party Bauyrzhan Baybek, “More than 10 thousand participants held more than 60 thousand meetings and debates, directly covering 1.4 million people.” As a result of the primaries, 77 out of 126 candidates on the party list were identified.

Third, the Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan of May 25, 2020, on Elections in the Republic of Kazakhstan was amended by the following paragraphs: “Only one list from one political party with many persons included, not exceeding thirty percent of the established number of parliamentary mandates distributed among the political parties, is allowed for registration” and “The number of women and persons under twenty-nine years of age on a party list must be at least thirty percent of the total number of persons on the list” (*Konstitutsionnyj zakon*, 1995).

Fourth, a year later, on May 25, 2021, another revision was added, which made several amendments at once:

- the regulation on elections of *akims*. Candidates may be either party representatives or self-nominated;
- the threshold for political parties to pass in Majilis elections was lowered from 7 to 5 percent of the popular vote;
- the inclusion of the ‘Against all’ option in the ballots at all levels of elections.

What are these changes indicative of?

Critics and skeptics say they are indicative of ‘cosmetic changes’ and ‘formal reforms’:

- there is no opposition representation in the Majilis to take advantage of the new norms (Raisova, 2020a);
- the *Nur Otan* party primaries were a mere formality, as they were won by the old guard rather than new party members. Moreover, winning the primaries does not guarantee a place on the party list (Mamashuly, 2020; Zhartieva et al., 2020);
- elections of *akims* will be held at the expense of administrative resources and party influence (Mamashuly, 2021);
- the 30% quota is mandatory only for the compilation of the list, but not for the actual representation of the party in the Majilis (Raisova, 2020b).

All these reforms were adopted within less than two years of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev taking office. Each of these initiatives was communicated in advance by the President and soon translated into legislative amendments. Given the difficult period in the economy and politics associated with the ‘coronacrisis,’ this is a breakneck pace of reform.

In addition, while weaknesses may appear in each one of these reforms if taken individually, together, they formed an overarching plan. The main objective of this plan is to reduce the influence of informal and neo-patrimonial structures on the political and social life of the country.

The strong influence of clan elites is worth considering when analyzing any political process in Kazakhstan, including the presidentialization of political parties.



According to many experts, nowhere has the role of informal politics been more evident than in post-Soviet Central Asia (Isaacs, 2010). The view of Kazakhstan's domestic politics has been shaped mainly within the discourse of clan politics, as expressed in many publications that discuss how politics operates in post-Soviet Central Asian states and, in particular, the Republic of Kazakhstan. According to Kathleen Collins, politics in Kazakhstan can be conceptualized through informal organizations (clans) (Collins, 2002). One of the most disturbing things about the shadow system of 'pressure groups' in the social, economic, and political sphere is their exceptional resistance to change. Systems based on a mixture of personal interests and family ties are extraordinarily static and, to some extent, even 'ceremonial' (Isaacs, 2010).

The stability of the political system created by First President Nazarbayev undoubtedly depended on him being an effective arbitrator of the interests of opposing groups. Isaacs (2013) asks whether the state system built by Nazarbayev on arbitration of 'clan interests' was more stable and efficient than a system without such arbitration? Since the system of informal clans is characteristic not only for Kazakhstan but also for other Central Asian countries, the example of Uzbekistan provided an unequivocal answer—such a system is much more stable. However, such stability comes at a high price. First and foremost, the 'clans' often resist reforms and socioeconomic change because it does not correspond with their traditional interests. The more the Republic of Kazakhstan has reformed, the more fragile the balance of interests has become. Up to a certain stage, the increasing political weight and authority of Nursultan Nazarbayev allowed him to compensate for this imbalance. However, at some point, the development of this system came to a halt.

President Tokayev differed considerably from the first President, as evidenced by his activity and personal qualities. So why exactly was he chosen as the successor? Tokayev was not appointed President to play the role of an arbiter in the political system of Kazakhstan. Furthermore, Nursultan Nazarbayev continued to perform this role until the events of January 2022. *Elbasy* acted as a kind of 'barrier' between formal and informal spheres of politics in the Republic of Kazakhstan, while President Tokayev was the Head of state, who pursued policies without regard to the interests of informal clans. This was reflected in the established distribution of powers—representative and executive for President Tokayev and ensuring public stability and security for *Elbasy*.

The vulnerability of this system, while effective, was that it was based on Nazarbayev's influence and authority. The situation has not changed much since his resignation—political stability in Kazakhstan was dependent on the First President. Nevertheless, it gave time and opportunities to build a system that would be stable despite informal networks. And that is exactly what the reforms of the 'diarchy period' were aimed at.

First, the institutionalization of the opposition in Parliament, combined with a lowering of the threshold to 5%, should have stimulated the further development of Kazakhstan's party system. It could be a pathway out of the zero-sum situation clearly visible in the 2021 elections, when it was virtually impossible to identify in the platforms of the two other parties that entered the Parliament any meaningful differences from the ruling party. This was due to the fact that the absolute majority of seats that the *Nur Otan* party won made the issue of determining the policy by the Parliament irrelevant. The new version of the Law was designed not only to increase the representation of other parties, but also to give them the opportunity to provide a constructive alternative to the government's policies.

Second, the holding of 'primaries' and the introduction of a 30% quota for women and young representatives on party lists had the same aim—to increase diversity in political and party representation. At the heart of this process was the recruitment of representatives of the *Zhas Otan* or the so-called 'Nazarbayev youth' (Laruelle, 2019), who were born and raised in Kazakhstan, received a good education at foreign universities, and returned to their native country with a yearning to change it for the better.

The same idea was expressed by Nursultan Nazarbayev himself in his farewell speech as President: "My generation and I have done all we can for the country. You know the results. The world is changing, and new generations are coming. The process is natural. They will solve the problems of their time. Let them try to make the country even better" (*Pochemu Nazarbaev ushel*, 2019).

For example, the appointment of Bauyrzhan Baibek as the first deputy of the party was accompanied by the following comment: "he is a young citizen, 40 years old soon, but already about four years he worked as a deputy chief of staff, he visited all regional branches of our party, all *akims* know him" (*Bauyrzhan Bajbek naznachen*, 2013).

In general, young politicians were less conservative and more driven by ideals rather than personal interests. This gave reason to hope that with

the influx of ‘young blood’ into politics, the influence of informal leaders had to decrease proportionally.

The introduction of the elections of *akims* was the most important of these reforms. As Rico Isaacs (2010) argues, ‘Clan politics, therefore, makes clear the relationship between Central Asia’s past and present. Tribal and clan identities have persisted over time, unmoved by the great Soviet project. The durability of such identities continues to impress and shape the political development of modern Central Asian states and are instrumental in explaining authoritarian regime trajectory.’

A peculiarity of the localization of the informal system is its linkage to local government and benefit distribution systems. Furthermore, *akims* are the main links in this chain. The authors of the reform hoped that although the electoral process would undoubtedly have been accompanied by irregularities and problems at its initial stages, the reform should ultimately have led to an increase in the publicity of the *akims*’ activities and a weakening of corruption mechanisms.

However, these factors could only indirectly impact informal networks. The question arises: which instrument in the Nazarbayev/Tokayev diarchy provided most effectively the stability of Kazakhstan’s political system?

The most important direction of reform in the party sphere was the conversion of the resource of presidentialization into the formalization of the *Nur Otan* party’s position as a stabilizer of the process of informal elite competition. At the same time, the ability to play such a role was provided by a high degree of the dependence of the ruling party on the image of Nursultan Nazarbayev. In order to compensate for its inevitable weakening, the party needed to develop its own political style and its own program and ideology, but as a result it found itself in a logical trap. The *Nur Otan* needed to build up its credibility in isolation from Nazarbayev’s personal charisma to become institutionally stronger. However, without it, the party lost the factor that made it the dominant political force in the country and was getting weaker.

To overcome this barrier, the *Nur Otan* party needed to use the resource of presidentialization. It could potentially create instability and expose political factionalism if it existed. The party was a channel for balancing the interests of clans and groups of officials, which ensured stability, and this suited both Nursultan Nazarbayev and President Tokayev.

However, on January 2, 2022, a situation occurred in Kazakhstan that no analyst or expert could predict. After a sudden increase in prices for liquefied gas due to the transition to a market pricing mechanism, mass protests began in the gas-producing city of Zhanaozen (southwest of Kazakhstan), which spread to Almaty and other cities of the country on January 3. Very fast, the protesters changed their economic demands to political ones. They demanded the dismissal of the government and the resignation of former President Nazarbayev from all his posts.

In Almaty, on January 4 and 5, protests turned into riots, arson attacks on government buildings and pillage. The authorities lost control of the city. The former residence of the President and the *Akimat* (mayor's office) were burned, protesters captured the airport, the Internet and online payment terminals were disconnected. Although in most other cities, including the capital of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan (Astana), the authorities kept control over the situation, a state of emergency was declared across the country. President Tokayev dismissed the government of Askar Mamin and assumed the duties of the head of the Security Council of Kazakhstan instead of Nursultan Nazarbayev.

It should be noted that according to the Constitution of Kazakhstan, all law enforcement agencies are subordinate to the head of the Security Council. Such a system previously allowed Nazarbayev to keep control over them without being president. But in the crisis, a single decision-making center with full power was needed, including to seek help from foreign allies. Tokayev received such powers when he became the Chairman of the Security Council and assumed full political responsibility.

At his request, on January 6, the temporary entry of the forces of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) into the country was announced. The military contingent included the armed forces from Russia and 5 other countries. A peacekeeping anti-terrorist operation was planned to protect important facilities, to help maintain law and order and to clean up cities from protesters. The deployment of the CSTO troops has played a decisive role in stabilizing the situation in Kazakhstan.

At the online summit of the CSTO leaders, Tokayev called the January events the most severe crisis in the history of independent Kazakhstan. He described the incident as the 'Alma-Ata tragedy' and announced an attempted coup. During the riots, about 1300 enterprises and organizations, more than 100 shopping centers, banks were damaged, about 500 police cars were burned, the total economic loss from them could amount

to \$ 2–3 billion (*Kasym-Zhomart Tokaev provel peregovory*, 2022). More than 8000 people were detained (*Okolo 8 tysyach chelovek*, 2022).

Two weeks after the start of the protests in Kazakhstan, the First President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has remained silent all this period, made a video address to the nation. He approved the actions of the current president, denied reports of a conflict of elites in the country and declared himself a pensioner. This meant the complete transfer of power to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.

Nazarbayev spoke when the situation as a whole has already stabilized and the formation of a new vertical of power and the ruling team has begun. Many people from his inner circle have lost their posts.

By January 27, both chambers of the country's Parliament approved the abolition of the lifelong status of 'Elbasy' for Nazarbayev (*Senat Kazahstana predlozhil*, 2022). At the subsequent extraordinary congress of the ruling *Nur Otan* party, Tokayev was unanimously elected as the new Chairman instead of Nazarbayev. Nazarbayev retained only a symbolic position of a member of the Constitutional Council (*Nazarbaev lishilsya*, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

On 16 March 2022, President Tokayev announced his intention to make the transition "from a super-presidential form of government to a presidential republic with a strong parliament." He stated that "the merging of party structures with the state apparatus is highly undesirable" and suggested "to legislate the obligation of the President to terminate membership in the party for the period of his powers." According to him, "This norm will increase political competition, ensure equal conditions for the development of all parties." He also proposed to legislatively prohibit governors and their deputies from holding positions in local party branches and simplify the procedure for registering parties: "The registration threshold should be reduced fourfold—from 20 to 5,000 people," Tokayev said. "The minimum number of regional representative offices will be reduced three times—from 600 to 200 people. The minimum number of citizens' initiative group to create a party will be reduced by almost a third, from 1,000 to 700 people" (*Poslanie Prezidenta Tokaeva*, 2022). On 26 April 2022, Tokayev resigned as chairman of the *Amanat* party.

This political reform, which has already begun to be implemented, means not only an attempt by the new leader of Kazakhstan to extricate himself from dependence on the former structures of the Nazarbayev regime, but an attempt to reshape the country's political system. The President is distancing from the 'party of power,' seeking to assume a neutral supra-party position. This reduces the role of the ruling party in the political system and provides greater opportunities for the authoritarian regime to maneuver between the various factions of Kazakhstan's political elite. At the same time, the appointment of the head of the Parliament of Kazakhstan Yerlan Koshanov as Chairman of the *Amanat* party shows that the regime has not abandoned the use of the party as a tool to maintain its dominance and an institutionalized channel of inter-elite communication and interaction. In this regard, the Kazakh political system is closer to the Russian and Turkmen political systems and estranged from the Azerbaijani and Tajikistani systems, where the President retains the position of the ruling party head. In this regard, the political system of Kazakhstan is getting closer to the Russian and Turkmen ones and moving away from the Azerbaijani and Tajik authoritarian models, in which the President retains his position as the leader of the ruling party.

Overall, the party system in post-Soviet Kazakhstan is typified by the following features. Firstly, although its importance in the country's political system has increased somewhat in the last two decades, since the 2000s it has been under the effective control of the ruling regime—genuine opposition parties and movements have been ousted from the political field: the real multi-party system has given way to an essentially one-party system. Secondly, the role of political parties and even the party of power in the political system remained circumscribed: it was not the party of power that ruled Kazakhstan, nor was it in charge of appointments of top officials or the adoption of key decisions even at the legislative level; the *Nur Otan* party was only an instrument of the authoritarian personalist regime, its appendage. Thirdly, the defining role of informal networks and power mechanisms in the party system of Kazakhstan has led to the dominance of personalist parties, highly centralized parties, with an authoritarian leadership style, including the party of power: formal democratic intra-party institutions remained only a veil for the top-down decision-making mechanism. The real levers of control were concentrated in the hands of the party leaders or their close entourage.

If we consider the party system of Kazakhstan from the perspective of its presidentialization, it becomes obvious that in his relations with the ruling party, its leader (head of state) was totally independent of it and its governing bodies and was not accountable to them; he made personnel and other decisions autonomously, not taking into account the opinions of either the party ordinary members or party officials. The successes and failures of the party in elections of various levels depended on his support, and the choice of candidates from the party, primarily in parliamentary elections, depended on his decision. And this type of relationship, which is basically patron-client, tended to be reproduced in other parties as well. Formal institutional resources, constraints, and opportunities were of no particular importance for the operation and evolution of the party system in Kazakhstan, unless they were used to prevent serious opponents of the ruling elite from participating in elections. The party system of Kazakhstan remained and remains a prisoner of the neo-patrimonial regime.

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