

Parliamentary Elections in Kazakhstan

January 22, 2021

Kazakhstan, a U.S. partner in areas such as regional security, counterterrorism, and nuclear nonproliferation, held parliamentary elections on January 10, 2021. According to the [official tally](#), the ruling Nur Otan party won 71% of the vote, followed by Ak Zhol (11%) and the People's Party of Kazakhstan (9%), granting each party 76, 12, and 10 seats, respectively, in the lower house of parliament. Two other parties, Auyl (5%) and Adal (4%), did not meet the 7% threshold to secure parliamentary mandates. No opposition parties participated in the elections, and the results yield a seat distribution broadly similar to the previous convocation of parliament, which included the same three parties. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) [concluded](#) that the elections “lacked genuine competition,” noting that the electoral contest highlighted the necessity of the government’s promised reform program. Kazakhstan’s [authoritarian](#) government has touted recent [legislative changes](#) as furthering the democratization and modernization of the country’s political system. [Critics](#) argue, however, that these initiatives remain largely superficial.

Kazakhstan is a presidential republic with power heavily concentrated in the executive. Although constitutional amendments passed in 2017 devolved some powers to the legislature, the dominant Nur Otan party is [closely aligned](#) with the executive branch. The bicameral parliament comprises a 49-member Senate, designed to be nonpartisan, in which 34 senators are indirectly elected and 15 are appointed by the president, and a 107-member lower chamber, the *Majilis*. Nine *Majilis* deputies are selected by the [Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan](#) (APK), a constitutional body representing the interests of Kazakhstan’s various ethnic groups. The remaining 98 members are directly elected via a closed-list proportional system in a single nationwide constituency. Parliamentary seats are allocated to parties rather than to specific candidates, and party authorities are not bound by the order of their party list in deciding which candidates will take up a mandate in the *Majilis*. Of the six parties legally registered in Kazakhstan, [five](#) participated in the January electoral contest; all support the government. The All-National Social-Democratic Party (OSDP) decided to [boycott](#) the elections after Mukhtar Ablyazov, a [fugitive](#) former bank executive and vocal critic of Kazakhstan’s government, called on his supporters to vote for the party. Ablyazov’s political movement, Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, was [banned](#) as “extremist” in 2018. Analysts speculate that the OSDP wanted to avoid a “[toxic](#)” association with [Ablyazov](#).

These were the first parliamentary elections held since the unexpected 2019 resignation of Kazakhstan’s longtime leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who had served as president since the country became

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independent in 1991. Nazarbayev maintains broad powers as First President and Leader of the Nation, and he continues to hold key posts such as leader of Nur Otan, head of Kazakhstan's Security Council, and chairman of the APK; some analysts [contend](#) that significant change is unlikely as long as he remains entrenched in the political system. Nevertheless, Nazarbayev's hand-picked successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, has coupled an emphasis on [continuity](#) with [promises](#) of systemic [reforms](#) aimed at modernizing Kazakhstan's political system and improving government accountability. Upon assuming the presidency, Tokayev announced the advent of a "[listening state](#)" that would be responsive to its citizens. The presidential transition was met with an unprecedented wave of protest and civic activism, including calls for a parliamentary form of government.

While the government has advanced legislation formally aimed at political modernization, some [analysts](#) see these initiatives as largely cosmetic. In May 2020, Tokayev signed a new law regulating demonstrations, ostensibly intended to facilitate sanctioned protests. [Critics](#) argue, however, that onerous [restrictions](#) and bureaucratic requirements mean that the ability to protest remains "[more a privilege than a right](#)." Additional legislation [formalized](#) the concept of a [parliamentary opposition](#), but critics contend that Kazakhstan's lack of political pluralism renders the *Majilis* a rubber-stamp legislature. Although legislative amendments decreased the number of members required to register a new political party from 40,000 to 20,000, significant [barriers](#) remain [in place](#). No new parties have successfully registered in Kazakhstan since [2006](#).

Although the same parties continue to hold seats in parliament, the composition of the chamber has changed; 70% of Nur Otan's deputies are new to the *Majilis*, and 40% are women and/or under 30. The elections have brought few changes to key government posts, however, with [Askar Mamin](#) reappointed as prime minister and [Nurlan Nigmatullin](#) retaining his post as speaker of the *Majilis*; two [cabinet ministers](#) were replaced. In line with the new legislation formalizing a parliamentary opposition, Ak Zhol and the People's Party each received the chairmanship of one of the seven standing committees in the lower house. Nur Otan's incoming deputies include Nursultan Nazarbayev's daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva, who [returns](#) to parliament after leaving her post as speaker of the Senate in May 2020.

Limits on opposition political activity and the detention of [hundreds](#) of protestors on election day highlight enduring [human rights concerns](#) in Kazakhstan. In addition to calling attention to pressure on nongovernmental organizations and disruptions to internet service, international groups [criticized](#) the January 10 [kettling](#) of civic activists by police for up to nine hours in freezing temperatures. The OSCE [noted](#) that voting was efficiently administered despite the challenges presented by the ongoing Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, but cited issues with transparency and restrictions on constitutionally guaranteed fundamental freedoms that impeded citizens' political participation. New [requirements](#) for election observers reportedly made it more difficult for domestic groups to monitor polling places, as they are entitled to do by law. Pandemic-related regulations also reportedly served as a pretext for expelling [observers](#) and [obstructing](#) independent media coverage.

In a January 15 address to the new parliament, Tokayev [announced](#) further reforms with the stated aim of strengthening human rights protections, expanding civic participation, and promoting the development of a multi-party system. These initiatives include new human rights legislation and lowering the electoral threshold for parties to enter the *Majilis* from 7% to 5%. Nevertheless, Tokayev's announcement coincides with [ongoing](#) government [pressure](#) on [independent organizations](#) in what Human Rights Watch [termed](#) a "shocking" and "blatantly unlawful" attack on freedom of association.

Author Information

Maria A. Blackwood
Analyst in Asian Policy

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