



By: TA | AP Brief

Kazakhstan's parliamentary election expected to strengthen president's grip on power



Polls opened Sunday in Kazakhstan's parliamentary elections, a vote expected to further to strengthen President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's power in Central Asia's largest nation.

The ruling pro-presidential Adilet party is widely predicted to win an overwhelming majority, with several smaller parties loyal to Tokayev also anticipated to enter parliament.

Tokayev, 73 — a former Soviet official and Kazakh diplomat who previously worked at the United Nations — has been in office since 2019.

It is the country's first elections to a new, single-chamber parliament called the Kurultai.

Sunday's vote is the culmination of a constitutional overhaul Tokayev initiated in March, when 87% of voters supported a referendum to merge the two chambers of parliament into one and grant the president authority to appoint key officials, subject to parliamentary approval, including reestablishing the vice presidency.

Tokayev, who has sought to maintain a delicate balance between Moscow and the West since sanctions were imposed on Russia over the war in Ukraine, has justified the changes by citing the need for rapid decision-making in a fast-changing world.

Last month, Kazakhstan's Constitutional Court ruled that the amendments effectively reset the clock on Tokayev's previous terms in office, opening the door for him to run for another seven-year term.

Difficult economic moment

The election comes at a difficult economic moment for Kazakhstan: inflation hit 10.2% in February, and tax hikes have fueled public discontent.

Analysts say the economic strain has made authorities wary of a repeat of the unrest of January 2022, when fuel price protests spiraled into violence that left dozens of protesters and

police officers dead — a scenario Tokayev is seeking to guard against by concentrating power in his own hands.

Tokayev said the vote promises to be a "truly historic event."

"Without a doubt, these elections will be remembered as perhaps the most interesting in our country's history," Tokayev said Friday. "Amid unprecedented geopolitical tensions and mounting global challenges, we must firmly and consistently implement our strategy to transform Kazakhstan into a truly developed state."

The vote is also taking place against a backdrop of intensifying crackdowns on press freedom.

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Media organizations have urged Tokayev to drop criminal charges against several journalists currently under house arrest and to revise the country's legislation to ensure press freedom.

Authorities have opened roughly 10 criminal cases against independent journalists and popular bloggers.

The most recent case involves Lukpan Akhmedyarov, an independent journalist who hosts the YouTube project "Prosto Zhurnalistika", or Simply Journalism.

He told The Associated Press that a criminal case was opened against him in August on charges of "disseminating false information" after he published a list of Kazakhstani citizens fighting in Ukraine. He faces up to seven years in prison.

"In the run-up to these parliamentary elections, repression has intensified sharply, with attacks on independent media, cyberattacks, and criminal cases launched

against independent journalists and popular bloggers,” Akhmedyarov told the AP from Almaty. “It feels like the authorities want to silence all media outlets they don’t control — everyone they couldn’t reach an agreement with or couldn’t buy off.”

Akhmedyarov said the streets of Kazakhstan’s major cities are “flooded with advertisements and posters for the pro-presidential Adilet party.”

“It is not very difficult to predict the outcome of these elections,” he said.