

Kazakh elections take place amid rising social tensions

Clara Weiss**27 January 2012**

On January 15, Kazakhstan held its parliamentary elections amid rising social tensions. Only a few weeks earlier, on December 16, security forces massacred at least 17 striking oil workers in the town of Zhanaozen, many more were wounded (see “Police massacre striking oil workers in Kazakhstan”). In its report on the elections, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) noted widespread ballot rigging and intimidation of voters, especially in the region around Zhanaozen.

The official turnout was 76 percent and for the first time, two opposition parties, the Communist Party and Ak Zhol (“Bright Path”), gained seats in the parliament next to the ruling Nur Otan party (“Fatherland’s ray of light”), which won 81 percent of the votes. With 7.2 and 7.8 percent of the votes, respectively, the Communist Party and Ak Zhol barely crossed the 7 percent threshold.

President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s description of the elections as “an important step toward the modernization of the political system” is ludicrous. In fact, the buildup of a controlled multiparty system is a reaction of the ruling elite to rising social tensions.

While nominally an “opposition” party, the Communist Party of Kazakhstan has backed the policies of Nazarbayev ever since his coming to power in 1990. Idealizing Stalinism and promoting nationalism, the party has become a crucial prop for the ruling elite due to its ties to the state trade unions and various pseudo-left groups. Both have played a major role in betraying the strikes of oil workers in the past years. The Stalinists are now to help the government keep the coming struggles of the working class under control.

Ak Zhol, on the other hand, was founded only after last year’s presidential elections on the initiative of

Nazarbayev. Its membership is drawn mainly from the ruling Nur Otan party and the Atakemen Business Association, which includes the heads of several major Kazakh corporations. Until the party’s foundation, its chairman, Azat Perushev, had been a member of Nur Otan.

The presidential elections in April last year showed signs of growing nervousness on the part of the ruling elite. In the spring, the shock wave of the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia reached Kazakhstan, whose ruling class could well identify itself with the corrupt kleptocracy of the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak. In the aftermath of the Arab spring, the presidential elections scheduled for 2013 were moved forward.

Vladimir Kozlov, the leader of the pro-business opposition party Alga!, suggested in an interview that the reason for this decision was that the government feared Nazarbayev would be unable to gain enough support from the population in later elections. The election result, according to which Nazarbayev was reelected with 97 percent of the votes, implied major electoral fraud. In his inauguration speech, the president announced the creation of a two-party system in 2015, with Nur Otan along with a party that would represent the interests of big business—Ak Zhol.

The brutal crackdown on oil workers in December of last year again highlighted the nervousness of the ruling elite. While the official number of the people killed in the attack is 17, human rights organizations claim that dozens of people were murdered by the police and hundreds wounded. Eyewitnesses indicated that the crackdown was initiated by deliberate provocation.

On January 5, Nazarbayev extended the state of emergency and curfew indefinitely. The government fears that the protests of the oil workers will draw in larger sections of the working class, resulting in a

confrontation with the corrupt oligarchy that is centered on the Nazarbayev clan. According to the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the oil workers had demanded not only higher wages and better working conditions, but also the resignation of Nazarbayev.

In recent years, tens of thousands of workers have participated in numerous strikes and protests in the country's oil-rich west. These struggles of the working class are an expression of the growing social polarization in Kazakhstan. The country's Gini index, an indicator of the scale of social inequality, is 0.48—i.e., significantly higher than both Egypt (0.34) and the US (0.41). According to the UNO's Human Development Report of 2009, the poorest 10 percent owns but 3.5 percent of the national income, while the richest 10 percent controls 25.9 percent.

The vast gulf between rich and poor is the immediate outcome of the restoration of capitalism in the aftermath of the country's declaration of independence and the collapse of the Soviet Union. While a tiny layer of former bureaucrats and new oligarchs enriched itself unrestrainedly, millions of workers were plunged into poverty.

A report by the German Federal Agency of 2007 notes the total breakdown of the country's health care and education system. Public expenditures on education, for instance, shrank from 6 percent in 1990 to 2.3 percent in 2005. Malnutrition and illnesses like tuberculosis, HIV and alcoholism have become serious social problems.

President Nazarbayev is the embodiment of the corrupt Stalinist bureaucracy that emerged as a new bourgeoisie, getting rich on privatizing nationally owned companies. The private fortune of the former chairman of the Kazakh Soviet Republic and general secretary of the CPSU in Kazakhstan was estimated at US\$7 billion in 2010.

Despite a major economic boom based on the exploitation of the country's oil and uranium resources since 2000, the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst estimated that 70 to 80 percent of the population lived in poverty in 2011.

The beginning of the world financial crisis in 2008 showed, moreover, how fragile this economic growth really was. The country's banking sector nearly collapsed, as Kazakh banks had borrowed a huge amount of bad loans from American financial

institutions. The inflation rate soared to 17 percent in 2008, and could be kept at a little over 7 percent in 2009 and 2010 only thanks to heavy government interference. However, due to its dependence on foreign investors, especially from China and the US, Kazakhstan remains highly vulnerable to a further aggravation of the world economic crisis.

The ruling elite are well aware of the social tinderbox they're sitting on. In an interview with the newspaper *Zakon* on January 23, the Kazakh prime minister, Karim Massimov, said that a second wave of the world economic crisis was "inevitable." Massimov cited the uprisings in the Arab world and working class struggles in Greece in 2011 as examples.



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