

Snap Parliamentary Elections in Kazakhstan: Outlook and Issues for Congress

April 14, 2023

Overview

[Kazakhstan](#), a U.S. [partner](#) in areas such as counterterrorism, nonproliferation, and regional security, held snap parliamentary elections on March 19, 2023. The electoral contest for the *Majilis*, the lower chamber of parliament, was announced in January when President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev dissolved the previous convocation of parliament, whose term was set to expire in 2026. These elections follow constitutional changes introduced in 2022 and represent part of Tokayev’s [reform agenda](#). Some Members of Congress have [expressed](#) interest in expanding U.S. engagement with Kazakhstan, and in Kazakhstan’s reform process; other Members have conveyed [support](#) for Kazakhstan’s reforms while expressing concern about alleged human rights abuses in the country. The Biden Administration has [stated](#) its “full support” for Tokayev’s reform agenda, and the government of Kazakhstan seeks to [consolidate](#) bilateral relations with the United States.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) [noted](#) “elements of competitiveness” in the elections, but also flagged “significant procedural irregularities” and said citizens’ ability to fully participate in political life remains hampered by restrictions on freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression. While self-nominated candidates were allowed to run for the first time since 2004, the ruling Amanat party secured a parliamentary majority, winning 63 of 98 seats. No election in Kazakhstan has been deemed “free and fair” by OSCE observers, and the country is rated “not free” by [Freedom House](#).

Political Background

Following large-scale [unrest](#) in January 2022 and Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, President Tokayev moved to consolidate power as his country confronts domestic economic challenges and difficult geopolitical dynamics. Tokayev’s reforms are restructuring Kazakhstan’s political system and annulling the privileged position of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who held office from 1991 until his resignation in 2019. While authorities argue reforms are moving the country in a more democratic direction, skeptics [question](#) whether Kazakhstan will implement genuine democratization. Although

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN12144

Tokayev's vision for a "New Kazakhstan" [includes](#) development of a "multipolar party system" and "fair and free political competition," some analysts [question](#) the degree of political pluralism Kazakhstan's government will allow, and see Tokayev's reform program as one of "[authoritarian modernization](#)."

In a move some analysts see as part of Tokayev's efforts to reduce Nazarbayev's influence, Kazakhstan held a [constitutional referendum](#) on June 5, 2022. Voters approved a range of changes curtailing some presidential powers and [removing](#) mentions of Nazarbayev from the constitution. Tokayev [said](#) the constitutional changes would shift Kazakhstan from a "super-presidential form of government to a presidential republic with a strong parliament." Following additional legislation passed in September 2022 that extends the presidential term from five to seven years and imposes a one-term limit, Tokayev announced a [snap presidential election](#) for November, two years ahead of schedule; he won 81% of the vote.

Electoral Process and Results

The parliamentary elections took place within a new legislative framework approved in the 2022 constitutional referendum. These changes reduced the size of the *Majilis* to 98 directly-elected members, removing the nine seats previously allotted to the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, a constitutional body chaired by the president. Reforms also reduced the electoral threshold for political parties to enter parliament from 7% to 5% and eased the process for registering new parties. Two new parties registered in the months preceding the elections, marking the first time since 2006 that the government approved a new party's registration. Critics [contend](#), however, that both parties are [aligned](#) with the government, and that government opponents remain unable to register their parties. One scholar [argues](#) that the seven parties that participated in the elections represent "an attempt by the system to cover different parts of the electorate," rather than independent political forces.

Under the new mixed electoral system, 69 seats in the *Majilis* are elected from party lists in a single nationwide electoral district using a proportional system, while the remaining 29 are elected in single-mandate districts, using a first-past-the-post system. The latter category allowed self-nominated candidates to run, yielding an unusually [active](#) campaign. Of the 435 candidates for single-mandate races, the majority were self-nominated, with 76 nominated by a political party. Electoral authorities [removed](#) some independent candidates from the ballot. Ultimately, members of Amanat won 23 of the 29 single-mandate seats. In the [assessment](#) of one analyst, "none of the truly independent candidates secured a seat." In the party-list contest, Amanat won [54%](#) of the vote, yielding 40 seats. Five other parties entered parliament.

While Amanat's 63-seat majority is lower than the 76-seat majority it held in the previous parliament, experts [view](#) all the parties in parliament as pro-presidential and do not expect any of them to challenge Kazakhstan's political status quo. When the new parliament convened on March 30, Tokayev reappointed Alikhan Smailov as prime minister; Smailov has held that office since January 2022.

The official turnout figure, at 54%, is the lowest-ever in Kazakhstan's post-independence history; actual turnout may have been [lower](#). Some analysts [interpret](#) the low turnout as a sign of widespread disillusionment with the government and the political process.

Outlook and Issues for Congress

While the government of Kazakhstan continues to tout ongoing reforms, one scholar [argues](#) that Kazakhstan's authorities are pursuing "a modicum of change, but only the type of change they can control." Some voters in Kazakhstan expressed [frustrated](#) hopes following the elections, at a time when Kazakhstan's government faces a range of challenges stemming from the shifting geopolitical

environment. Because of close economic ties between Russia and Kazakhstan, Russia's war in Ukraine places Kazakhstan in a difficult position. The country is facing significant [inflation](#); some analysts argue that this may spur further public discontent. On April 11, authorities [detained](#) oil workers protesting over economic grievances.

Congress could consider whether to seek opportunities for developing U.S.-Kazakhstan relations given shifting geopolitics, and how the United States might support democratization in Kazakhstan. In light of the war and related sanctions, Kazakhstan aims to [diversify](#) its trade relationships. Members may consider how U.S. engagement can help Kazakhstan and other Central Asian nations reduce their dependence on Russia.

Author Information

Maria A. Blackwood
Analyst in Asian Policy

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.