

INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM IN THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN: PAST AND PRESENT

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Political pluralism and a multi-party system are regarded today not only as the basic principles of a democratic society, but also as the fundamental prerequisites of democracy in general. In this context, Kazakhstan, which declares itself to be a democratic state,¹ has been giving much attention recently to transforming the country's political sphere.

A retrospective view of the development of a multi-party system in the republic makes it easier to break down the institutionalization of its party system into relatively distinct stages.

During the first stage (1985-August 1990), the state's ideology crumbled and fell apart, the multi-party system became legitimized, and the people experienced euphoria over the imminent changes. "Politics was regarded as a process during which vitally important issues were indeed resolved, and this atmosphere gave rise to an outburst of public enthusiasm and drew charismatic personalities onto the political stage."² Numerous independent public associations with views on society and the state that differed from the official stance began to spring up. In so doing, organizations prevailed that did not pursue political goals but were engaged in social problems—environmental, culturological, and

¹ See: *Konstitutsia Respubliki Kazakhstan*, TOO Baspa, Almaty, 1998, p. 3.

² E.K. Ertysbaev, "Golosovali za programmu Nazarbaeva. Posleslovie k vyboram. Predvaritelnye zametki," *Kazhanskaja pravda*, 19 January, 1999.

historical—and tried to have an influence on the power structures in order to resolve these problems. The most well-known of them were: the Nevada-Semipalatinsk International Anti-Nuclear Movement (Nevada-Semipalatinsk IAM, date of establishment—February 1989), the Memorial Society (December 1988), Adilet (April 1989) and Қазақ тілі.

Multi-thousand meetings and other mass actions were held under the supervision of well-known poet O. Suleimenov, thus helping Nevada-Semipalatinsk IAM to achieve its goal: the Semipalatinsk testing ground in Kazakhstan was closed down.

This experience stood the movement leaders in good stead. They were later able to create a political organization on its basis. The Memorial and Adilet societies were engaged in investigating the Stalinist repressions, helping the victims to become rehabilitated, and looking for mass shooting and burial sites. The Қазақ тілі Republican Society set itself the task of reviving the Kazakh language, culture, and spirituality; its national-cultural centers strove to preserve the national cultures of the various ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan.

In 1989, the first political organizations appeared: the Forum Society, the Zheltoksan Committee, and the Kazakhstani Public Human Rights Committee.

As of 1 March, 1990, there was a total of more than 100 registered and unregistered public associations, most of which were organized as clubs.³

In March 1990, Art 6 of the U.S.S.R. Constitution on the leading role of the communist party was abolished. This paved the way for transformation of the one-party system into a multi-party system. The first political parties, which were essentially proto-parties, appeared in Kazakhstan. Their main program goals focused on the resolution of ethnic issues—the Alash Party of National Freedom (the Alash Party, April 1990), the Social-Democratic Party of Kazakhstan (SDPK, May 1990), the Zheltoksan National-Democratic Party (the Zheltoksan Party, May 1990), and the Azat Civilian Movement of Kazakhstan (Azat CMK, July 1990)—and of environmental problems—Nevada-Semipalatinsk IAM and the Aral-Balkhash movement.

On the whole, the political organizations of this period were small in size, obscure, and did not enjoy public support due to the conservative mindset of the population. The multi-party system that formed at this stage was distinguished by support of the socioeconomic reforms carried out in the U.S.S.R., on the one hand, and loyalty to the current regime, on the other. If these organizations were radical in any way, they expressed it only in their evaluation of the reforms and in criticism of the political leadership.

In September 1990, the development of the multi-party system in the republic entered the next stage (September 1990–March 1995). As we know, the Declaration on the State Sovereignty of the Kazakh S.S.R. of 25 October, 1990 proclaimed ideological and political diversity in the republic, which promoted the development of political pluralism.⁴ This was subsequently enforced by the Law of the Kazakh S.S.R. on Public Associations in the Kazakh S.S.R. (June 1991) and the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan of 1993.⁵

The second stage demonstrated more vigor and diversity.

- First, the first officially registered political parties appeared: the Socialist Party of Kazakhstan (SPK, September 1991), the Republican Party of Kazakhstan (RPK, September 1991), the

³ See: S. Diachenko, L. Karmazina, S. Seidumanov, *Politicheskie partii Kazakhstana, 2000 god* (reference guide), Almaty, 2000, p. 289.

⁴ See: “Deklaratsiia o gosudarstvennom suverenitete Kazakhskoi SSR,” *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, 28 October, 1990.

⁵ See: *Zakon Kazakhskoi SSR “Ob obshchestvennykh ob’edineniakh v Kazakhskoi SSR,”* Almaty, 1991; *Konstitutsia Respubliki Kazakhstan*, official edition, Almaty, 1993.

People's Congress Party of Kazakhstan (PCPK, October 1991), the Communist Party of Kazakhstan (CPK, October 1991), the Party of National Unity of Kazakhstan (PNUK, February 1993), the National-Cooperative Party of Kazakhstan (NCPK, December 1994), and the Party of Revival of Kazakhstan (PRK, January 1995).

- Second, during this time, sociopolitical movements actively came forward on a par with sociopolitical parties. Among the first were: Azat CMK, the Edinstvo (Unity) Interethnic Movement (Edinstvo IM, August 1990), the Pokolenie (Generation) Movement of Social Legal Protection of Pensioners (Pokolenie MSLPP, November 1992), the Union of National Unity of Kazakhstan Republican Movement (UNUK, February 1993), the Lad (Concord) Republican Public Slavic Movement (Lad RPSM, March 1993), and the Solidarnost (Solidarity) Workers' Movement of Kazakhstan (September 1994).
- Third, unregistered political parties also operated in the political sector: the Social-Democratic Party of Kazakhstan (SDPK, May 1990), the Alash Party, the Zheltoksan Party, the Party of Democratic Progress of Kazakhstan (DPK, November 1991), the Tabigat Party of Social Justice and Environmental Revival (Tabigat PSJER, May 1993), and others.
- Fourth, the sociopolitical associations functioning at this time were already distinguished by different ideological inclinations: socialist (SPK), liberal-democratic (PCPK, PNUK, NCPK), national-democratic (RPK, PRK), and communist (CPK).

The high level of activity of the democratic-nationalist parties and movements that arose on the wave of revival of the Kazakhs' national consciousness (the Alash Party, the Zheltoksan Party, RPK, and PRK) and the growth in anti-Russian moods that accompanied this process (Edinstvo IM and Lad RPSM) are a special trait of this period. These associations promulgated ideas of national statehood and put forward ethnic values. Such efforts gained significant electoral support in the struggle to make Kazakh the state language, adopt and execute the Declaration on State Sovereignty of Kazakhstan, the Law on State Independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan of 1993, preserve territorial integrity, and prevent regional separatism.

Some members of the national political elite, as well as some representatives of the Kazakh intelligentsia who considered themselves infringed upon in Soviet times strove to gain leading positions in the republic's politics and economy with the help of these parties. Non-indigenous residents, primarily Russians, created the parties for protecting their own civil and social rights.⁶

- Fifth, this period was marked by structuring of the political opposition with respect to the policy of the president and government of Kazakhstan. The opposition wing consisted of the SPK, CPK, PCPK, the Zheltoksan Party, Azat CMK, Lad RPSM, Pokolenie MLSP, and others. In addition, the first attempt was made to unite the opposition in the Respublika Coordination Council of Public Movements.
- Sixth, in March 1994, the political parties and public associations gained their first experience in participating in elections of deputies to the legislative body—the Supreme Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan of the 13th convocation.
- Seventh, whereas at the end of the 1980s the emergence of numerous public associations occurred spontaneously from below, the power structures now began to control it from above.

⁶ See: V. Babak, "Kazakhstan: How Its Multiparty System Came into Being," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (32), 2005.

As Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev noted in 1996, “the establishment of a party system in Kazakhstan is unique in the fact that it is being orchestrated from above.”⁷

- Eighth, this stage paved the way for a national dialog in the country between civil society and the government. It was launched by the Consultative Council (CC) of Political Parties and Public Associations, which included more than ten well-known political parties and movements of various ideological orientations, created in February 1993 on the initiative of the PCPK.

This structure functioned for a year, discussing the urgent problems of current life requiring coordinated actions at its meetings. The CC’s activity resulted in the drawing up of joint alternative proposals on issues relating to the state’s payment arrears to the population and its failure to carry out social security measures and on practical measures to bring more influence to bear on the legislative process. It also provided assistance in concluding a General Trilateral Agreement on the Fundamental Principles of Cooperation among the government, the Federation of Trade Unions of Kazakhstan, and the republic’s Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs.

Despite the fact that the government did not take direct part in the dialog, preferring (apart from signing the General Trilateral Agreement) to watch from the sidelines, the work experience of the Consultative Council led to President Nazarbaev addressing the public forces in March 1994 with a proposal to enter an Agreement on Public Consent. Taking into account the realities of Kazakhstan’s post-totalitarian society with its low political culture, this agreement would enforce the principles and provisions agreed upon by all the participants in the political process (primarily the political parties) that first of all ensured stability and civilian peace in Kazakhstan. And although this idea was not put into practice at the national level, it was supported by several political organizations, and in some regions of the country such an agreement was signed.⁸

On the whole, between September 1990 and March 1995, the transformation of sociopolitical organizations into parties and the formation of new parties were perfunctory in nature, since they were not supported by a broad social and electoral base, and their popularity depended on the personal activity of their leaders. At this stage, political parties continued to pose themselves as certain proto-party structures that did not have legislative support of their activity or any influence on the political processes in the country. They had a low level of political competitiveness, their activity was concentrated in the country’s center, and they had no regional branches.

The main milestones of the third stage of institutionalization of the multi-party system in Kazakhstan (April 1995-September 1998) were the development of political parties in the context of authoritarian democracy and the formation of a legal foundation for the multi-party system, which included constitutional enforcement of the ideological and political diversity in the country (1995) and adoption of the Republic of Kazakhstan Laws on Public Associations (May 1996) and On Political Parties (July 1996).⁹

All the registered parties continued to function at this stage. But new ones also appeared: the Democratic Party of Kazakhstan (DPK, July 1995) and the Republican Political Party of Labor (RPPL, September 1995). Unregistered party structures also continued to function. New sociopolitical movements began gaining renown: oppositional—the Azamat Civil Movement (Azamat CM, fall of 1995) and pro-government—the Liberal Movement of Kazakhstan (LMK, April 1997).

In December 1995, the political parties took part in the elections of deputies to the parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan. And although other public organizations also had the right to nominate

⁷ N.A. Nazarbaev, *Na poroge XXI veka*, Almaty, 1996, p. 170.

⁸ See: S. Diachenko, L. Karmazina, S. Seidumanov, op. cit.

⁹ See: *Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan “Ob obshchestvennykh ob’edineniyakh,” Vechernii Almaty*, 31 May, 1996; *Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan “O politicheskikh partiakh,”* official edition, Almaty, 1996.

their candidates, which eroded the status of the parties, the latter were able to build on the first experience they gained of independent participation in the election campaign in 1994.

Since 1996, trends have been designated in Kazakhstan toward political consensus between the political parties and the government, coordination, the formation of a mechanism of public consultations among the entities of the political system, and the state's targeted domestic policy aimed at realizing its national-state interests by democratizing society and establishing cooperation with political organizations.¹⁰

The People's Union in Support of Reforms Advisory-Consultative Association (ACA) continued enhancement of the national dialog in the country by holding a series of round tables in 1998 in which 18 political organizations participated. This process was aimed at unifying the pro-government parties that dominated in the ACA, while there were simultaneous attempts to bring structure to the opposition forces that consolidated within the framework of the National Front of Kazakhstan (NFK).

We will note that the third stage saw final confirmation of the institution of a multi-party system in Kazakhstan and its transformation into a customary attribute of life. The political parties are stating their views with increasing frequency and having some influence on the political processes in the country. People acknowledge that the ethnic problem is of a secondary nature and are moving away from populist democracy. Active inter-party building, development of a territorial party network, and improvement of the program base are underway.

At the same time, the party structures are very weak and unstable as far as organization goes. There is pluralism without an inter-party struggle. There are no effective legal levers of party influence on society. Many parties do not have the population's real political support. As a result, by the end of this period, development of the existing parties was limping. This was partly due to the fact that the majority election system without party lists that functioned at that time did not permit the parties to participate directly in the election campaign, which slowed down the formation of strong political parties.

When the fourth stage (September 1998-June 2002) began, the establishment and development of political parties entered a qualitatively new phase.

In his Address to the People of Kazakhstan in September 1998, the president stated that the government's development policy was aimed at democratization and political liberalization. This policy, among other things, was aimed at strengthening the parties' role in the political system.¹¹

The amendments to the country's Constitution in October 1998 and to the election law in May 1999 envisaged a new mixed election system.¹² Along with elections by districts, elections according to party lists were also introduced, for which an additional ten mandates appeared in the parliament's Majilis. This improvement of the election system made it possible for the parties to compete at the elections in December 1999 not only indirectly, by routing for their candidates to the election districts, but also directly, by putting forward party lists for a single nationwide district. As a result, these elections saw the first real inter-party struggle.

This innovation led to the formation of an entire galaxy of new political parties of different ideological orientations: the Civilian Party of Kazakhstan (CPK, November 1998), the Republican People's Party of Kazakhstan (RPPK, December 1998), the Agrarian Party of Kazakhstan (APK, January 1999), the Otan Republican Political Party (Otan Party, January 1999), the Azamat Democratic Party

¹⁰ See: S. Diachenko, *Partogenez v Kazakhstane: sostoianie, problemy, perspektivy*, KISI, Almaty, 1997.

¹¹ See: N.A. Nazarbaev, "Poslanie Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan narodu Kazakhstana. 'O polozhenii v strane i osnovnykh napravleniakh vnutrennei i vneshnei politiki: demokratizatsiia obshchestva. Ekonomicheskaiia i politicheskaiia reforma v novom stoletii,'" *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, No. 184, 1 October, 1998.

¹² See: *Konstitutsionny zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan "O vyborakh v Respublike Kazakhstan"* (with amendments and addenda), TOO Baspa, Almaty, 1998.

of Kazakhstan (Amazat Party, March 1999), the Democratic Party of Women of Kazakhstan (DPWK, June 1999), the Auyt Peasant Social-Democratic Party (Auyt Party, January 2000), the Party of Patriots of Kazakhstan (PPK, July 2000), and the Ak zhol Democratic Party of Kazakhstan (Ak zhol Party, March 2002).

As the republic's political history showed, the most significant and system-forming aspect for Kazakhstan was the restructuring of the pro-presidential forces and the creation of the Otan Party at the Republican Public Headquarters, which supported presidential candidate Nursultan Nazarbaev and united the PNUK, DPK, LMK, and the For Kazakhstan-2030 movement. This was done to prevent the votes from being spread among the parties of the pro-presidential camp, thus depriving these parties of the possibility of clearing the 7% barrier imposed by the proportional election system.

Although Otan appeared at a time of high competition, when the political spectrum was overflowing with all manner of parties, it already had clear advantages over its political adversaries from the very start.

First of all, as the Public Headquarters in support of President Nazarbaev at the elections, it had gained experience in political work both in the center and in the regions, in carrying out agitation and propaganda at the entirely new level of building a civil society. Plus the electorate associated the party with Nursultan Nazarbaev, the candidate it supported, so the majority continued to show its preference for Otan at the parliamentary elections.

Moreover, the headquarters' organizational and personnel network that spread throughout the republic as far as the cities and regions was the basis on which this new party was formed and significantly accelerated this routine work.

It was also important that the party obtained a large amount of initial resource support—organizational, personnel, and intellectual—from the PNUK, DPK, and LMK, which joined Otan with a good political reputation already intact, on the one hand, and enjoyed the administrative resource both in the center and in the regions, on the other.

And, finally, the interest in this party expressed by Nursultan Nazarbaev, who had not given particular preference to any of the political structures functioning in the country since 1991, turned into direct support of Otan when the president became a member of this party and its chairman.

All of this made it possible to classify Otan as an elite party with a serious future.

As was to be expected, the actions undertaken by the power structures during the election campaign to consolidate their political forces were crowned with success. The pro-government parties became the election campaign leaders among the ten political parties that put forward their party lists and gained the majority of seats in the lower house of parliament (the Majilis), both according to party lists and in one-mandate districts. In particular, according to the party lists, they acquired the absolute majority of seats (8 out of 10), four of which were taken by Otan, two by the CPK, and two by the APK. The opposition (in the form of the CPK) only received two mandates.

However, in the fall of 2001, an event occurred in Kazakhstan's political sphere that showed the ambiguity of the processes going on within the government itself. Some of the republic's leading businessmen, parliamentary deputies, cultural figures, and representatives of the independent media initiated the creation of the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan Sociopolitical Movement (DCK). The DCK's declaration stated that Kazakhstan proclaimed itself to be a democratic state, but nevertheless remained a state with a centralized government. This, according to the founders of the DCK, could lead and was leading to many contradictions in the country's public life and to an increase in social tension, which is extremely detrimental to the development of statehood and the strengthening of the republic's economy. So the newly created movement was in favor of decentralization of state power, expansion of the rights and powers of the representative branch, introduction of electivity in the local executive branch, creation of a just and independent judicial system, restoration of the Constitutional

Court, creation of a system of election commissions independent of the executive branch, liberalization of media activity, and so on.

The DCK essentially set forth the views of the current opposition and the latter, in the form of the Forum of Democratic Forces of Kazakhstan, supported the movement's demands, although it also stated that it would only cooperate with it providing it confirmed its declaration in practice. However, the initiators of the DCK did not regard themselves as oppositionists. They also emphasized their complete support of the policy being carried out by the country's president, Nursultan Nazarbaev, and said they wanted to help the head of state open his eyes to the real state of affairs in the republic and undertake suitable measures to correct the critical situation.

In actual fact, the appearance of the DCK aggravated the struggle among various groups in the ruling elite for influence on the head of state and occupation of the key posts in the state apparatus, business sphere, and mass media.¹³ This is precisely why certain bureaucrats occupying prominent posts in the government and management system openly stated their participation in this movement. But such behavior by representatives of the government elite was unprecedented at the time, since it was not coordinated with the leadership. So it was evaluated as a threat to the current system of relations in the sphere of state governance and management. Consequently, Prime Minister Tokaev accused the DCK organizers of slander, putting pressure on the president, government, and parliament in order to realize their interests, inactivity on the job, and destabilization of the political situation in the country. On this basis he suggested that the president dismiss the government officials who participated in the creation of the DCK from their posts.

The head of state did indeed dismiss several people, but without harsh words and criticism, even expressing some regret about what had happened and the hope that these people would remain members of his team. This resulted in a split in the ranks of the DCK as early as March 2002, when some of the movement's organizers set up the moderate opposition party Ak zhol Democratic Party of Kazakhstan. The DCK, on the other hand, which supported the opposition forces of Kazakhstan, took up a radical position.

So at the fourth stage in the development of the country's party system, political parties became an independent influential democratic institution which the power structures can reckon with and rely on. The people of Kazakhstan also changed their attitude toward parties. The distance they maintained from the political structures was replaced with differentiation in party preferences. As a result, the political parties acquired a real social support base.

Party factions arose in the parliament's new composition. Their five years in the field yielded valuable experience in carrying out faction activity in the country's highest legislative structure.

The development of Kazakhstan's party system entered the fifth stage in June 2002. It continued until 2005. At this stage the political parties swelled their ranks, unregistered party structures left the political scene, the political clout of the functioning parties grew, stronger opposition party organizations appeared, sociopolitical movements had less influence on political life, and there was further institutionalization of the national dialog between the political parties and the government.

All of this was promoted to a significant extent by the new law on political parties adopted in the summer of 2002, which envisaged the re-registration of parties.¹⁴

Several inactive parties could not collect the necessary number of member signatures (50 thousand) for this and so they died a natural death (the RNPk, PRK, DPWK, the Azamat Party, the Alash Party, and the PCPK). The RPPT and NCPK decided to join Otan, which happened in November 2002.

¹³ See: A.E. Chebotarev, "Sozdanie 'Demokraticeskogo vybora Kazakhstana,'" 18 November, 2001, available at [www.kub.kz.home.php], archive.

¹⁴ See: *Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan "O politicheskikh partiakh,"* official edition, Almaty, 2002.

As of 1 July, 2002, only seven of the 19 officially functioning political parties had re-registered: Otan, CPK, Ak zhol, APK, CPK, PPK, and the Auyl Party.

This stage was also marked by the appearance of new political structures. The Rukhaniat Party (April 2003) was created on the basis of the PRK, which failed to pass re-registration. In November 2003, the Asar Republican Party (Asar RP) appeared. On the basis of the DCK, the opposition formed the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan People's Party (DCK PP, February 2004). In the spring of 2004, the Adilet Democratic Party of Kazakhstan (Adilet Party) was registered. The split in the Communist Party resulted in the appearance of the Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan (CPPK, June 2004). And the split in the Ak zhol Party resulted in the creation of the Real Ak zhol Democratic Party of Kazakhstan (Real Ak zhol Party, April 2005).

During this time, the opposition gained in strength. Its members boasted charismatic leaders who were well-known in the country and a product of the new economic and political relations. They had specific views and programs on Kazakhstan's further development and made significant adjustments to the country's official course. However the DCK PP's critical statements of the government prompted the Almaty city court to ban the party (January 2005).

Such changes in the country's party sector led to a much more honed and lively political struggle at the elections to the maslikhats in 2003 and to the Majilis in 2004. This was the first time the parties had an opportunity to use all political techniques available in the election campaigns of developed countries.

At this stage the interaction between the government and the sociopolitical institutions also underwent dramatic changes. There was further institutionalization of the national dialog in the form of ongoing consultations (PDC) of the country's political forces with the government's participation. These consultations were actively carried out in 2003. They involved representatives of the political parties, the country's parliamentary deputies, and other sociopolitical figures. The opposition ignored the consultation efforts, referring to the fact that the head of state was not participating personally in the national dialog. But even in this situation its role in the development of the dialog between the government and society is difficult to overestimate. The range of issues discussed at the PDC meetings proved to be good analytical material for the state structures in elaborating the further course toward democratization.

In the fall of 2004, the status of the dialog was raised when a National Commission for Democratization and Civil Society Affairs under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (NCDA) was created on the basis of the PDC. The NCDA functioned from 2004 to 2005. Its ranks were significantly replenished, its participants were divided into working groups, each with specific social tasks to deal with, and decisions were made at the government level. The opposition forces also took part in the activity of this commission.

Finally, another feature of the development of pluralism at this stage should be noted. The activity of the parties themselves changed. The largest of them—Otan, Asar, and Ak zhol—competed among themselves not only during the election campaign. They were constantly on the go, particularly in parliament and in the regions thanks to their well-developed party structure that reached as far as the auls and villages.

The presidential election held in 2005 showed the real achievements of party development. The parties were able to demonstrate open public activity, high mobilization of the electorate, a diverse arsenal of agitation work, new approaches to covering their activity in the mass media, and active assimilation of the information arena on the Internet.

The opposition parties were much more prepared for the 2005 presidential election than in the past. This was shown by the opposition's consolidation and the attempt to nominate a single candidate. Although on the whole the opposition was unable to even retain the electoral position it occupied at the 2004 parliamentary elections.

The second half of 2006 was marked by restructuring of the political forces. Otan was the clear leader in the party sector. The party's confident victory at the elections to the Majilis in 2004 and of its leader, Nursultan Nazarbaev, at the 2005 presidential election, as well as the reputable and constant support and attention toward the party from the head of state helped to raise its authority and image in the eyes of the Kazakhstani people, as well as promote their understanding of the role of parties in the state's political system.

On 4 July, 2006, two large parties—Otan and Asar—merged into a single political party under the aegis of Otan. The ranks of the pro-presidential bloc continued to swell in November–December when the Otan party was joined by the Civilian and Agrarian parties, and Otan itself was renamed the Nur Otan People's Democratic Party (the Nur Otan Party). As a result, the total number of members in the rejuvenated party amounted to around one million, which made it a real party giant: Kazakhstan had never had such a large party in its entire independent history. Its rating at the end of 2006 topped 60 percent, and this was the highest index among all the parties.¹⁵

The government was the initiator of this process. In particular, at the 9th congress of the Otan Party and later at the 7th congress of the Civilian Party of Kazakhstan, President Nursultan Nazarbaev emphasized the need for a national party with a strategic vision of the country's development. Such a party should enjoy mass support and powerful organizational and intellectual resources corresponding to the strategic tasks facing Kazakhstan and permitting it to successfully implement the national idea—a strategy designed to place the country among the 50 most competitive nations of the world.¹⁶

Deputy head of the presidential administration M.S. Ashimbaev noted that “the time has come for the concepts ‘party in power’ and ‘ruling party’ to be filled with specific content. The Otan Party won the elections to the Majilis, Senate, and maslikhats. And in our specific case, the united Nur Otan Party should be transformed into a real party in power. And not only real, but also effective. The party in power should take active part in forming the government. It should efficiently explain the policy carried out by the country's leadership, ensure public support of the government's undertakings, uphold the government's policy in the face of the opposition, ensure feedback with the population, and so on. That is, it should carry out targeted ideological and explanatory work. This complies with the generally accepted approaches throughout the world. The party, its members, and its apparatus should all have the necessary level of preparation.”¹⁷

As for unification of precisely those political parties that take this step, this is entirely predictable, legitimate, and logical. The platforms of four parties were very similar. The current president was the leader of them all, so their electorate overlapped. In addition, these parties formed a single coalition at the presidential election of 2005 by acting with the joint support of Nursultan Nazarbaev. All these components, according to the party leaders, were a legitimate basis for merging, which should have promoted the creation of a strong, effective, and competitive party system in Kazakhstan.

The government's efforts to build a single mass, responsible party supported by most of the population and possessing all the necessary resources led to the conclusion that a mature and developed party system was the key link in the political process at this stage and that a multi-party system with a principal party was forming in Kazakhstan. In this respect, positive shifts were occurring in party-building and an important trend was clearly seen: minimization of the party system and formation of large parties that clearly expressed the interests of the main social groups.

¹⁵ See: P. Karavaev, “Maulen Ashimbaev: Nam nuzhna deistvennaia partiia vlasti,” *Liter*, 29 December, 2006.

¹⁶ See: N.A. Nazarbaev, *Vystuplenie na IX s'ezde Respublikanskoi politicheskoi partii “Otan,”* 7 July, 2006, available at [www.akorda.kz], official site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan; idem, *Vystuplenie na VII s'ezde Grazhdanskoi partii Kazakhstana,* 10 November, 2006, available at [www.akorda.kz], official site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

¹⁷ P. Karavaev, op. cit.

Researchers began actively expressing their opinions about the kind of party system Kazakhstan needed in 1999 when such a promising actor as Otan appeared on the party scene. It was presumed that events could develop in the most diverse way: a party system with Otan as the principal party, a multi-party system with a coalition government, a two-party system, or a two-bloc party system.¹⁸

It is known that the creation of a particular party system in each specific country greatly depends on the state's election system, which determined the number of parties, their size, the specifics for forming party coalitions, the amount of representation in parliament, and so on. This reflects the principle formulated by Maurice Duverger, in compliance with which proportional representation promotes a multi-party system, whereas the majority election system with voting in one round tends toward a two-party system.¹⁹

In the Republic of Kazakhstan, the introduction of the procedure for electing ten parliamentary deputies according to party lists in October 1998 along with the existing majority system helped to structure society in accordance with political interests and led to the appearance of six new political parties. As a result, the trend toward the emergence of new party structures is observed right up until today. So it would seem that Kazakhstan should form a multi-party system with a coalition government. But this is impossible since there is no legislative provision that envisages formation of the government by means of political parties gaining seats in parliament. In addition, the creation of Nur Otan, as already noted, led to its domination in parliament. And this gives rise to a different type of party system with a principal party (one-and-a-half party) in compliance with which one party regularly wins the elections and dominates in the power structures for years on end despite basic democratic procedures and a multitude of parties. The president himself talked about the possibility of Kazakhstan arriving at that type of party system, referring to the experience of Sweden, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, India, and Mexico.²⁰

However, the republic's movement toward building a party system with a principal party aroused a wave of criticism from the opposition parties and several researchers.

Some thought that reform of the party system boiled down to creating a super party, Nur Otan, which in terms of its work methods and bureaucrat membership would be more like the Communist Party of the Kazakh S.S.R. than a democratic party created for parliamentary work.²¹

Others presumed that since the non-constructive opposition had been relegated to the periphery of political life, consolidation of the party in power might lead either to a total loss of citizens' interest in politics or to a social explosion. For a long time the situation involving pocket parties was kept under control precisely because of their functional fragmentation. Now, taking into account the size of the party that has emerged, the situation could change in a relatively short time.²²

Others were sure that all attempts to create any kind of party-political system would fail because this process should occur naturally. Attempts to simulate a system, be it bi-party or tri-party, might end in society's rejection of it.²³

Still others did not exclude the possibility of creating a two-party system along the lines of the American one.²⁴

While still others claimed that since the main characteristic of any party system is not the total number of parties, i.e. the quantitative aspect, but their qualitative interaction with each other and with

¹⁸ See: A.E. Chebotarev, S. Ismailova, "Partiinoe stroitelstvo v Kazakhstane prodolzhaetsia," *XXI vek*, 11 March, 1999.

¹⁹ See: O.Z. Mushtuk, *Politologiya: Uchebnoe posobie*, Market DS, Moscow, 2006, pp. 373-374.

²⁰ See: N.A. Nazarbaev, *Vystuplenie na LX s'ezde Respublikanskoi politicheskoi partii "Otan"*, 7 July, 2006.

²¹ See: F. Asimov, "'PR' v otsenke dostizhenii nezavisimogo Kazakhstana za 15 let," 20 February, 2007, available at [www.kub.kz].

²² See: M. Babaev, "Zachem ob'ediniat partiiu vlasti posle vyborov?" *Rossiiskie vesti*, 23 October, 2006.

²³ See: L. Chen, V. Radionov, "Partii budet dve ili bolshe? Realno li sozdat v Kazakhstane dvukhpartiinuiu sistemuu po obraztsu Soedinennykh Shtatov? Mnenie ekspertov," 9 February, 2007, available at [www.kub.kz].

²⁴ See: *Ibidem*.

the government, which is only possible if there are equal conditions for all the political players and, alas, is missing in Kazakhstan at present, all the talk about a multi-party or two-party system in the country is nothing more than empty babbling.²⁵

However, there were also supporters of the opinion that Kazakhstan is sooner leaning toward the creation of a one-and-a-half-party system that could be formed on the basis of one principal party striving to gather one half to two thirds of the parliamentary seats (at that time this is what Nur Otan was reckoning on). While all the other parties would gather one third of the mandates and either join a coalition with the principal party or remain opponents without any chance of coming to power.²⁶

According to the author of this article, the type of party system could only be determined based on the results of the amendments to Kazakhstan's legislation. The merging of political parties in itself does not signify the creation of a ruling party. As we know, the party that obtains the majority of seats in parliament at the elections is the ruling one. It forms the government or acquires the most ministry portfolios and participates directly in drawing up a development and state management strategy by carrying out its party program.

Nur Otan indeed had the absolute majority in the parliament at that time and many ministers were its members. But according to the legislation in effect at that time the government was formed not from candidatures offered by the party of the majority, but by the president at the proposal of the prime minister.

The State Commission on Drawing Up and Specifying the Program of Democratic Reforms under the Kazakhstan president (GKVD), which was created in 2006 and was the legal successor of the NKVD for organizing the national dialog in Kazakhstan, suggested changing this state of affairs. Incidentally, ultimate institutionalization of the national dialog and its entry into the final phase is a distinguishing trait of the fifth stage in the development of the multi-party system in the country. President Nazarbaev's personal participation in the work of the GKVD raised the dialog platform to the highest level of national debate, giving it a status of state importance.

From 2006 to the beginning of 2007, six commission sittings were held, within the framework of which, among other things, the problem of further development of the country's party sector and raising the role of the parties in its political system was actively discussed. At the final, sixth, sitting, President Nazarbaev said: "The time has come to look at the question of the prime minister gaining the support of the party of the parliamentary majority before occupying his post. This is world practice, and we should also rely on it."²⁷ The commission's work resulted in practical proposals being formulated regarding the main vectors of the country's political modernization.

The fifth stage in institutionalizing Kazakhstan's party design was also marked by the emergence of other party structures. At the same time as the parties of the presidential wing that united in the fall of 2006, a rightist-centrist party, Atameken, and two opposition parties, the National Social-Democratic Party (NSDP) and Alga People's Party (Alga Party), appeared.²⁸ Admittedly, only the NSDP was official registered at the Ministry of Justice.

In 2007 Kazakhstan entered the sixth, current, stage of party-building. Its starting point was the second constitutional reform of May 2007. The amendments to the country's Constitution resulted from the implementation of the National Program of Political Reforms that was launched in 2005. Within

²⁵ See: G. Dyrkina, "Dosym Satpaev: Konservatorov i 'iastrebov' vokrug prezidentskogo ukha bolshe, chem liberalov i storonnikov 'politicheskogo dialoga,'" *Respublika*, 9 February, 2007.

²⁶ See: L. Chen, V. Radionov, *op. cit.*

²⁷ *Vystuplenie N.A. Nazarbaeva na VI zasedanii Gosudarstvennoi komissii po razrabotke i konkretizatsii programmy demokraticeskikh reform 19 fevralia 2007*, available at [www.akorda.kz], official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

²⁸ See: "Sozdana novaia partiia 'Alga'," available at [www.npdvk.kz]; "Tuiakbai vozglavil 'Obshchenatsionalnuu sotsial-demokraticeskuiu partiuiu,' a Kozhakhmetov—ocherednuiu 'Algu'," available at [www.svobodanews.ru].

the framework of the GKVD program, specific proposals were prepared on the further modernization of the political sphere which formed the basis of the draft Law on Introducing Amendments and Addenda to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which was adopted by the parliament. The amendments to the Constitution changed the status and raised the role of political parties.

Specifically, deputies are now elected to the lower house of parliament, the Majilis, according to the proportional election system. For this purpose, the number of deputies in the Majilis was increased from 77 to 107, 98 of whom are elected according to party lists.

The proportional system of elections forms a party parliament, which entails questions of party discipline during voting. This is difficult if the deputies have free mandates. So the provision that a parliamentary deputy should not be bound to any imperative mandate was removed from the Constitution. This provision also presumes that a Majilis deputy is deprived of his deputy mandate when he leaves or is dismissed from the political party he was elected from, or when this party is liquidated.

The provision on the president ceasing his participation in a political party during his term in power was also removed from the Constitution. So the post of head of state became party-affiliated.

The new constitutional provision that the president appoints the prime minister only after consulting with the factions of political parties and with the consent of the majority of Majilis deputies put an end to the question of granting the parties the right to form the government. Now the concept “party in power” applies to the Kazakhstani party sector, while political parties are responsible for the classical role of this institution in countries with developed democracies. The prime minister represents the party of the parliamentary majority and the government should carry out the program of the party or coalition that won the elections. This raises the role of political parties in forming the government and the party of the parliamentary majority’s responsibility for its formation and its subsequent actions.

Introduction of the provision that the candidature of the future prime minister will be discussed at the faction meetings created a legal foundation for raising the role of the party factions in parliament. This is also promoted by the provision on the cancellation of a deputy’s free mandate, since it gives the factions the possibility of determining how deputies should vote at house sittings.

Removal of the provision on the prohibition of state financing for public associations also placed Kazakhstan’s party legislation on the same level as the legislations of developed states, where such a regulation has been in effect for several decades now. The activity of political parties has been partially financed since January 2008 from the republican budget.

Adoption of the amendments to the Constitution led to disbandment of the parliament and the holding of early elections to the legislative body on 18 August, 2007.

Seven political parties which put forward their party lists participated in these elections: Nur Otan (it nominated 125 people according to the list), the NSDP (80 people), Ak zhol (98), the CPPK (20), the Auyly Party (33), the PPK (11), and the Rukhaniyat Party (9). The Communist Party of Kazakhstan boycotted the elections to the Majilis motivating its refusal to participate by the fact that the communists are against the proportional election system, since “the candidate on the party list is like a pig in a poke, the people do not know him.” The Adilet Party participated in the elections under the banner of Ak zhol after “uniting” with it on the eve of the elections. The Real Ak zhol Party and the NSDP created a similar structure. These unions cannot be called election blocs since the amendments made to the Law on Elections in the Republic of Kazakhstan on 19 June, 2007 deprived political parties of the right to form election coalitions,²⁹ although the parties united as early as the spring of 2007 for precisely that purpose—to participate in the elections as a single bloc. They also intended to form united

²⁹ See: *Konstitutsionny zakon “O vyborakh v Respublike Kazakhstan,”* available at [http://election.kz/portal/page?_pageid=73,48269&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL].

political parties on the basis of these coalitions after the elections, but as time showed, after 18 August each party continued to act independently. So, based on the letter of the law, neither Adilet nor Real Ak zhol participated in the elections.

According to the results of the elections, with a voter turnout of more than 68%, Nur Otan was the winner with 88.41% of the votes. The rest of the votes were distributed as follows—the NSDP gathered 4.62%, Ak zhol 3.09%, the Auyl Party 1.51%, the CNPK 1.29%, the PPK 0.78%, and the Rukhaniat Party 0.37%. In other words, apart from Nur Otan, not one party was able to overcome the 7% representation barrier.

The results of the elections in the context of the new party legislation indeed designated the outlines of a party system with a principal party, which was Nur Otan.

These elections were dramatically different from all the previous ones in terms of how they were conducted and the results obtained. The introduction of a proportional electoral formula made it possible for the “party in power,” Nur Otan, to take 100% of the seats in the legislative body. At first glance, this contradicts the very essence of elections according to party lists that offer the political parties more opportunity than under the majority system to place their representatives in the country’s higher legislative body.³⁰ But here we should keep in mind the institutional and political context that had developed by the time the proportional system was introduced.³¹

Official justification for electing deputies to the parliament’s Majilis exclusively according to the proportional system was based, first, on the need to increase the chances of the opposition and small parties to be represented in the country’s legislative body and ensure fair representation in the context of a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state, which Kazakhstan is. Second, Kazakhstan had instituted a party government and it was important that the leading political parties participate in this process. In support of the official position, it should also be added that a change in the electoral formula from mixed to proportional would be a stumbling block for authoritarianism currently being manifested in Kazakhstan, which presumes the country’s further progress toward democracy. It is these motives that explain the growing world trend toward countries transferring to the proportional election system.

Indeed, the official version, as the classical system with essentially no glitches, functions in countries with a parliamentary form of rule. However, the combination of a strong presidential system and proportional rules is not that widely represented in world political practice,³² and, consequently, cannot serve as unconditional confirmation of those advantages that the proportional electoral formula has.

In addition, the introduction of a proportional system for electing deputies to the lower house in the context of a strong presidential system harbors certain dangers associated with the interrelations between the executive and legislative branches of power. If the president and parliamentary majority belong to different parties, this will raise the government’s conflict potential, whereas if they belong to the same party this could lead to domination of the executive power over the legislative. As N.V. Anokhina and E.Iu. Meleshkina note, “the second threat could develop if rules and practices exist that promote the domination of one political force.” But, on the other hand, if this “threat,” just like the domination of one party, is in the interests of the government, the latter could quite easily cultivate them with the help of the parameters of electoral competition.³³

³⁰ See: M. Duverger, *Politicheskie partii*, Transl. from the French, 3rd ed., Akademicheskii proekt, Korolev, Paradigma, Moscow, 2005, pp. 300-301 (French edition: M. Duverger, *Les Parties Politiques*, Seuil, Paris, 1951; English translation: M. Duverger, *Political Parties*, Wiley, New York, 1954).

³¹ See: N.V. Anokhina, E.Iu. Meleshkina, “Proporsionalnaia izbiratelnaia sistema i opasnosti prezidentsializma: rossiiskii sluchai,” *Polis*, No. 5, 2007, p. 8.

³² See: *Ibidem*.

³³ See: *Ibid.*, p. 2.

The main parameters of election systems include the following: the way the votes obtained are transferred into deputy mandates (electoral formula), the number of mandates distributed in the district (size of the district), the percentage of votes the candidates must gather in order to acquire a seat in parliament (representation threshold), and bulletin structure.³⁴ In so doing, the government can increase the “shortcomings” of the electoral formula in the context of a strong presidential republic by means of the size of the district and representation threshold.

Taking the latter into account, it appears that in actual fact the Kazakhstan government has decided to change the type of election system not only and not so much in order to strengthen the multi-party system and fair representation, but in order to enhance the designated outlines of the party system with a principal party and strengthen the position of this party. The following arguments can be put forward to justify this thesis.

According to American researchers R. Taagepera and M. Shugart, the size of the district has the greatest influence on proportionality: systems with a size of one to five are strong, since they put pressure on the voters, creating stimuli for developing large parties and reducing fragmentation of the party arena.³⁵ The proportional system in Kazakhstan is used within a single national district. In Kazakhstan today only Nur Otan is a mass political organization that has subdivisions in a wide variety of administrative-territorial units, including the smallest. Consequently, the use of a strong district will definitely be beneficial for the pro-government party.

A single national district is a large district, the size of which makes it impossible to use the system of open party lists, when the voter can vote not only for the list of the political party, but also for specific candidates from different lists, which naturally raises the parties’ chances of obtaining votes. Consequently, the logical use of closed lists in this case also helps to strengthen the position of the principal party, which is happening in Kazakhstan.

The success of the “party in power” is also increased by the defeat of the other parties that did not overcome the restricting barrier. It is logical that the height of this barrier, if it is not the threshold for the dominating party itself, will be a good restraining mechanism against an increase in pluralism of the parliament. In Kazakhstan, the representation threshold is 7%. But, as follows from the election results, even 5% would not have created any competition for Nur Otan in the current composition of the parliament.

In addition to the indicated parameters of the election systems—district size and representation threshold—additional possibilities of electoral competition are used in Kazakhstan for fortifying the position of the party in power. In particular, the introduction of a provision on the possible formation of a coalition government by the winning political parties makes coalition of its adversaries at the elections dangerous for the principal party. In this case, despite the proportional system, the possibilities of which significantly restrict the desire of parties to enter election campaign blocs, since their “independent performance at elections does not do them any harm,”³⁶ the parties see no other way to oppose domination than to unite into alliances. Keeping this in mind, the provision of the Law on Elections in the Republic of Kazakhstan on the right of political parties to form election coalitions was also removed.

All of these “unseen” and “unvoiced” possibilities of the proportional system coupled of course with the charisma of Nursultan Nazarbaev, who heads Nur Otan, the weakness of Kazakhstan’s opposition parties, as well as the use of the administrative resource led to absolute representation in the parliament Majilis of the pro-government party and defeat of the opposition. It is thought that with

³⁴ See: R. Taagepera, M.S. Shugart, “Opisanie izbiratelnykh system,” *Polis*, No. 3, 1997; A. Lijphart, *Electoral Systems and Party Systems. A Study of Twenty-seven Democracies 1945-1990*, Oxford, 1994.

³⁵ See: R. Taagepera, M.S. Shugart, op. cit.

³⁶ M. Duverger, op. cit., p. 311.

such characteristics, Nur Otan is guaranteed super representation in the legislative body and in the next election cycle.

So the dichotomy of the combination of a strong presidential system with different versions of the proportional election system expressed in the fact that this combination leads either to unresolved opposition among the branches of power or to concentration of power in the hands of one political actor is represented by the second version in Kazakhstan's case. In other words, the introduction of proportional representation in the lower house of parliament in May 2007 was used as a way to reduce the cost of forming a party system with Nur Otan as the principal party, and ultimately to boost the authoritative power of President Nazarbaev, who is the chairman of this party.

To sum up, it should be said that the ten political parties officially functioning today in the party sector (the CPK, the Auyl Party, the PPK, Nur Otan, Ak zhol, the Rukhaniat Party, Adilet, the CPPK, Real Ak zhol, and the NSDP) largely represent a sustainable political state institution—an inviolable attribute of public life, are one of the important factors of modernization of the country's political system, and have found their sociopolitical niche in the minds and conscience of some of the Kazakhstani people.

The model of a party system with a principal party, which has recommended itself well in several modernizing Asian and Latin American countries, is being implemented in the republic. The principal Nur Otan party has been created, which in time, according to the intentions of the country's leadership, should become the backbone for the entire party-political system, the main regulator of all the difficulties and contradictions existing and predicted in the foreseeable future in the development of Kazakhstan's society.

At the same time, in the context of the one-and-a-half-party system forming on the basis of the principal Nur Otan party and its absolute representation in the lower house of parliament the parties are having a weak influence on the political processes. In addition, several parties (the CPK, the Auyl Party, the PPK, the Rukhaniat Party, Adilet, and the CPPK) are showing the artificiality of their formation and activity, as well as the absence of broad support from the Kazakhstani people and of competitive development programs.

Despite the profundity of the changes regarding the role of parties in the country, the constitutional reform of 2007 had essentially no impact on the party climate in the republic, developing its legislative potential only for the party in power.