

Political and socio-economics reforms of Kassym Tokayev from 2019 to 2021

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ABSTRACT:

The fundamental expectation of Kazakh society from the authorities after the collapse of the USSR was to overcome the economic crisis and build a solid foundation for undisturbed development. Hence, the domestic policy of the first president Nursultan Nazarbayev focused primarily on economic issues. Attracting foreign capital and increasing the price of oil improved the macroeconomic situation, thus making it possible to satisfy physiological and security needs. Political efforts to integrate all ethnicity under the banner of an independent Kazakhstan partially satisfied the need for belonging. The provision of these three basic needs according to Maslow's pyramid contributed to the intensification of social aspirations, manifested by an increase in the desire of the population to participate in socio-political life. President Nazarbayev, as a politician who was shaped by the Soviet system, could not imagine the possibility of sharing power with society. This led to growing social discontent and, combined with the economic crisis, could have led to the outbreak of protests. Awareness of his own limitations led to his resignation as president after twenty-eight years in office.

As his successor, he appointed the long-time foreign minister Kassym Jomart-Tokayev. Tokayev, in order to meet the expectations of the people of Kazakhstan, declared readiness to carry out reforms already during the election campaign. In his program, he abandoned the slogan of Nazarbayev first the economy in favor of changes in politics and the economy must run parallel. The main slogan of the new policy became the increase of participation in political and social life of the country, desired by the society.

The main objective of the article is to determine the actual translation of reforms undertaken by Kassym Jomart-Tokayev in 2019-2021 on increasing public participation in the socio-political life of the state. An important aspect is also to determine the level of compatibility between the declared assumptions and their implementation. Low compatibility of the implemented transformations with social demands became one of the reasons for the outbreak of protests in January 2021.

KEYWORDS: Kassym Tokayev, reforms, society, participation, Republic of Kazakhstan.

INTRODUCTION

On March 19, 2019, Nursultan Nazarbayev resigned as President of the Republic of Kazakhstan after twenty-eight years. In fact, he ruled uninterruptedly for three decades since becoming the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan in 1989 [1].

Under Article 48 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 65-year-old Kassym Jomart-Tokayev became the interim head of state [2, 3]. The successful transition of power required early elections, so as early as April 9 in a proclamation to the people Tokayev announced the date of the elections on June 9. In addition, he

praised Nazarbayev for laying a strong foundation for statehood in Kazakhstan and for winning a worthy place for the republic in the international arena[4]. Referring in his speech to the policy of the first president met with an antagonistic reception. This led to consolidation of the supporters of the previous order, i.e. ethnic minorities living in Kazakhstan and the hard-liner electorate of Nur Otan. The rest of the society perceived it as a lack of independence. The candidate running for president had to convince the citizens of his independence. This was manifested by his readiness to carry out reforms leading to greater public participation in the creation of state policy, which could not be found in the way Nazarbayev managed the country[5]. This had the desired effect, some opponents of Nazarbayev decided to trust the new leader, hoping for a real turnaround in government-society relations. On June 9, 2019, the presidential election took place, and on June 12 the president-elect took the oath of office before the parliament[6].

As promised, the president began working on reform packages. The first package was presented in December 2019. It included reducing the number of signatures needed to register political parties, increasing the number of women and youth on electoral lists, and amending the Law on Assemblies[7]. Under the second package, in September 2020, the president pledged to hold Akim elections in rural areas. The third, announced in January 2021, involved lowering the electoral threshold from 7 to 5%.

The subject of research of the following article is the liberalization measures of the second President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Kassym Tokayev in 2019-2021. The analysis carried out is aimed at finding answers to the research problems posed: Were the reforms implemented by Kassym Jomart-Tokayev in 2019-2021 actually aimed at increasing public participation in the socio-political life of the state? Were the introduced reforms implemented in accordance with the previous assumptions? The preliminary analysis of sources allowed us to hypothesize that the reforms implemented by Kassym Jomart-Tokayev were not aimed at increasing public participation in the socio-political life of the state, and their main task was to reduce public dissatisfaction with the prevailing political-economic system. The preliminary hypothesis for the second research problem is that only some of the reforms were implemented as intended.

The main sources used in the research process are legal acts signed by the second president of the Republic of Kazakhstan and journalistic articles from the pro-state and opposition press. To a lesser extent, statistical data published by the State Statistical Committee and other economic research centers served as sources.

The research method used in the article was based on the acquisition and collection of materials, followed by processing using basic processing techniques (analysis, synthesis). The next stage consisted of drawing conclusions through the use of deduction and induction. Also used were elements of the decision-making method, which consists in considering socio-political phenomena and processes through two prisms: the prism of decision, i.e. by choosing a way of political action, and through the prism of political implementation - the process of realization of political decisions through the activation of appropriate means of action.

POLITICAL REFORMS

In setting the political reform agenda, Kassym Tokayev had to take into account the constitutional reform introduced since 2016. The systemic change increases the powers of parliament and government, while preserving the role of the president as the main creator of domestic and foreign policy with the prerogative to issue decrees with the force of law. The adopted solutions are to remain in force until a strong basis is created for the introduction of a parliamentary-cabinet system[8]. The introduction of such a system is not a reform, but only an attempt to restore order, which was introduced by the first Constitution of Kazakhstan in 1993[9].

Reducing the importance of the position of president in the entire political system translated into lower support for Tokayev in the presidential election than for Nazarbayev. Tokayev received 70.96% of the vote, while Nazarbayev received over 90% of the vote outside the 1999 election[10]. The reason for this was that the candidate of the uncontrolled opposition was allowed to run. It should be noted that in the elections of 2011 and 2015 all Nazarbayev's opponents were from quasi-opposition parties, subordinated to the government. According to the official results, the candidate of the opposition social movement *Ult Tagdyry* (Russian: *Улт тағдыры*) Amirzhan Kosanov got 16.23% of the vote. It is worth noting that this was the highest result of the main rival of the incumbent president in the history of Kazakhstan. For the first time in thirty years, it was shown that a large majority of citizens does not support the actions of the head of state, which should be considered a landmark event. It should not be forgotten that the admission of the opposition created a platform for the examination of public sentiment. Thanks to Kosanov's run, Nur Otan received a feedback message - how many percent of citizens actually support them and what chances they have in a democratic clash with the other groups. The actual results of this experiment cannot be known due to the falsification of official results, but they must have been a surprise to Tokayev. This is confirmed by the president's decision to introduce extensive legislative changes in 2020-2021 regarding the activities of political parties and the conduct of elections. The main problems hindering the implementation of this proposal are: the lack of a mechanism regulating the dialogue between the authorities and the society, the lack of political pluralism manifested in not allowing new groups to have their own representation in parliament. Tokayev, being aware of their existence, began to take steps to remove barriers in this aspect.

During his election campaign, the President promised to build a state that listens to the voices of its citizens. This manifested itself in declarations on the creation of *the National Council of Public Trust under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan*. The Council was to include representatives of authorities and social organizations. In addition, the establishment of a state-wide platform for the formation of petitions and direct elections of Akims in smaller administrative units were declared[11]. The first commitment was fulfilled already on the day of swearing-in i.e. June 12, 2019. The composition of the advisory body was made public on July 17, 2019. Only 9 out of 43 members could be described as community activists. Under this category were included lecturers working at state universities who are financially linked to the public administration through their work. The remaining advisors are people from the environment of the president, state institutions and controlled political factions[12]. The fact that the opposition activists were not allowed in confirms the conviction that the Public Trust Council has a facade function and is only supposed to give an impression of expanding the dialogue between the authorities and the society. The declaration about building a platform to collect signatures for civic projects remained in the declarative stage. In 2021, a year passed from the declaration of its creation, and the platform has still not been launched. Even if it is launched, it is expected that Kazakhstan's E-petitions will share the fate of the Russian portal *roi.ru*, where most projects, despite exceeding the required number of 100,000 signatures, are never debated in parliament[13]. The one-year delay reinforces the belief that the authorities in Nur-Sultan are afraid of publicizing many problems which have so far been ignored. Their number may translate into the perception of state structures as even less effective than it seemed to citizens. Tokayev kept his word on holding direct elections of Akims in smaller towns, which was realized during the next elections held on July 25, 2021[14]. The implementation of Akim elections was groundbreaking, as in theory it gave citizens the opportunity to decide who would become a representative of the local government. However, no legal regulations were implemented that would guarantee the independence of the local Akims coming from the general election, from those nominated by the authorities. This fact thus confirmed fears about the facade of the reformation. The results of the elections were reassuring; in most of the localities

covered by the popular vote, the new Akim were the candidates of the ruling Nur Otan party who had held these positions before the adoption of the new solutions[15]. Holding elections only in rural units guaranteed that Nur Otan would remain in power. There was no agreement on such elections in larger towns, because there was a real danger that the candidates proposed by the opposition would win. Such a scenario could come true in the largest city of Kazakhstan - Almaty - where from election to election the Nur Otan party receives fewer and fewer votes. On the other hand, it has led to an increase in discontent among city residents who see it as an attempt to divide the rights of the whole nation.

Before introducing the parliamentary-cabinet system, the lack of political pluralism had to be resolved. In May 2020, the President signed the supplementary law "On Political Parties". It reduced the number of required signatures for registration from 40,000 to 20,000[16]. In the same month, the law "On order of organisation and conduct of peaceful assemblies in the Republic of Kazakhstan" was amended[17]. Both of these measures should have a positive impact on the development of political pluralism. Reducing the threshold of required signatures was supposed to stimulate aspirations for the establishment of new groups, but the ruling party hoped to create parties of regional importance that would not threaten its interests at the state level. On the other hand, there was a threat about the possibility of their forming a joint list in the national elections. Thus, in 2020, the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan considered positively only 1 of 7 applications for registration[18]. This shows that the authorities allow only the formation of groups which, from their point of view, will not be harmful, or will be willing to cooperate. The amendment of the law on assemblies was supposed to make it easier for opposition groups to hold pickets and protest marches. The new law clearly defines the forms of peaceful assemblies, rights and obligations of organizers, participants and the media, which in practice should reduce the number of justified interruptions of such actions[19]. Ruling Nur Otan, however, realized that such actions could promote hitherto unknown political movements, so the provisions making it most difficult to organize rallies were not removed. It is still necessary to obtain approval from the local executive body, which is already quite an obstacle. After obtaining approval, local bodies can appoint an assistant to organize the demonstration, thus hindering its free course. The provision prohibiting calls to seize power has been maintained. Raising slogans about dismissing the president or removing Nur Otan from power is equated with an attempt to seize control. Meanwhile, the goal of any political group is to seize power, which makes it pointless to organize any pickets and rallies. Uttering these slogans may lead to the prosecution of the group's leader. Once the chairman receives such a verdict, the party has no chance to get permission to hold a rally in the future, because the legislation denies such a privilege to convicted persons.

The actions described above are a blatant attempt by the president to protect the interests of his own political environment. This is confirmed by subsequent legislative changes regarding the functioning of parliament and the electoral process. In June 2020, Tokayev approved the amendment to the Act "On the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Status of its Deputies" of 1995, and in January 2021, the President signed the amendment to the Act "On Elections in the Republic of Kazakhstan". The amendment on the parliament, strengthened the status of the parliamentary opposition. By giving it the opportunity to initiate parliamentary hearings at least once per session, the rights of leaders of political parties to speak at joint meetings of both houses of parliament, meetings of committees and working groups were guaranteed[20]. This procedure was an attempt to artificially expand pluralism. It was decided to do so because it would not significantly affect Nur Otan's leadership role. The results of the January 10, 2021 parliamentary elections were a confirmation of such an attempt. Quasi-opposition parties received high results - *the Democratic Party of Ak-Zhol* (10.95%), *the People's Party of Kazakhstan* (9.10%). The pro-presidential party Nur Otan received 71.09% of the votes. It is true that it was their

lowest result since 2004, but it still guaranteed them the preservation of the constitutional majority. This change had no other purpose than to send a signal to the public about the waning support for Nur Otan.

At the same time, before the elections, Tokayev signed an amendment increasing the quota of women and young people on electoral lists to 30%^[21]. Increasing the number of women and young people in parliament was supposed to show a readiness for change in the state apparatus. Meanwhile, women account for 27% of parliament members in the 7th parliamentary term, which is no difference to the 6th. The number of parliament members under 40 has increased from 7 to 19^[22]. The significant increase of the representatives of the younger generation is only of an image character as the most important decision-making positions will remain in the hands of the older generation. The failure to complete the constitutional reform will not strengthen the parliament, and thus the voice of women and youth will continue to be marginal in the creation of state policy. The signing of the law lowering the electoral threshold for political parties from 7% to 5% was a measure aimed at genuinely increasing political pluralism^[23]. However, it was signed only after the parliamentary elections in January 2021, which postponed its application for another 5 years. Thanks to these changes, in the next elections, the two groups that were under the threshold, *the National Democratic Patriotic Party Auyl* (5.29%) and *the Adal Party* (3.57%), have a chance to introduce their representatives to the lower house^[24]. This would increase the number of political parties in parliament from three to five. It should be remembered, however, that both of these parties are headed by politicians from the first president's inner circle, which will have no real effect on increasing political pluralism. This will only serve as a counter-argument to the accusations of a power grab by three groupings.

The actions described above are a blatant attempt to protect the interests of their own political circles. This leads to slowing down the momentum of reconstruction, which, in the opinion of the public, does not have a good effect on the perception of Tokayev as a reformer. Moreover, it shows that Nur Otan is not ready to participate in a full democratic struggle for power with the opposition circles.

SOCIO-ECONOMICS REFORMS

In 2015-2016, the Kazakh economy went through a slump. In May 2015, in response to the crisis, President Nursultan Nazarbayev announced the launch of the next stage of economic and social liberalisation under the name "*Plan of 100 concrete steps*". Due to the study of the increase in the consideration of social demands, only demands that directly affect the life of the average citizen were examined. The biggest socio-economic problems include: financial and housing difficulties, disparity between urban and rural life, lack of adequate medical care and ecological issues^[25].

The economic crisis of 2015-2016 reduced the living standards of most citizens. First of all, the deprivation was felt by families with many children. The protests of mothers began while Nazarbayev was still in office and grew stronger over time. This was due to the fact that during the years of economic prosperity, the president even encouraged women to have as many children as possible, assuring them of financial support from the state. Failure to do so could have led to a collapse in demographic growth, so necessary for a developing country. That is why one of the first laws Tokayev signed was the one on securing the existence of families in financial difficulties^[26].

High inflation in 2019-2021 has led to a decline in purchasing power by citizens earning the minimum wage^[27]. To top it off, there were no wage increases in 2019-2021. It remained at 42,500 tenge. The problem of the deteriorating material condition of citizens had to be solved. Otherwise, it could have threatened to erupt into protests. The authorities announced that from 1 January 2022 the minimum wage would be raised to 60,000 tenge ^[28]. Such a drastic wage increase – by 41% – could fuel inflation. For now, these are ad hoc solutions to defuse accumulated social discontent.

Falling wages have generated barriers to buying property. With current earnings and high interest rates on loans, the vast majority of the population cannot afford to buy a home. The solution to this problem is to become the *Nurly Zher* (Russian: Нурлы жер) *State Housing and Communal Construction Programme*. According to the plans, by 2025, the annual area of housing handed over is to increase to 20.7 million m². The plans are as realistic as possible, as in 2020, 15.3 million m² of flats were delivered, which means that in five years, the output must increase by 30%, which is +6% per year. Most of the buildings erected are to be used for low-cost rentals. This will lead to an increase in comfort, by increasing the living space per inhabitant to 26 m². In 2020 it was 21.9 m², so the plans are achievable. The last commitment under the programme is to ensure that all residents of the republic have access to mains water. Fulfilling this promise should not be a difficult task either, as in 2020 97.5% of urban residents and 87.7% of rural residents had access to mains water [29].

City dwellers have a better financial status, but they are not without problems. They have to contend with environmental pollution. The most troublesome is smog, which is found mainly in large agglomerations such as Almaty, Karaganda, Ekibastuz, Nur-Sultan and Shymkent. For many years the authorities ignored this problem, but the increase in the existence of civic organisations publicising the problem forced the president to act. On 2 January 2021, he signed *the Ecological Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan*. The document contained new regulations, including the introduction of the polluter pays principle, the categorisation of the harmfulness of objects, the introduction of emission standards and technological standards, the procedure for the disposal of harmful waste and mechanisms for the protection of water resources of the republic. The document is very extensive, containing as many as 418 articles. It provides great opportunities for environmental protection activities. It is fine-tuned in legal terms, but it must be applied in practice, with which there are still problems. An example of this is ignoring the constant complaints from the inhabitants of Shymkent about the failure of a steelworks and a refinery owned by Chinese capital to comply with emission and environmental standards [30].

Rural residents face more basic difficulties such as lack of access to medical care and limited financial and legal assistance for farming. President Tokayev, realising that the population of rural regions shows less resentment towards Nur Otan, had to come up with a viable programme to improve life in rural areas. The first solution is to restore the functioning of dispensaries as in Soviet times. For now, solutions have been adopted to have a doctor on duty at these centres at least once a week. Now the authorities are faced with the need to work out solutions to encourage doctors to practise in smaller towns. These must be sizeable incentives, mainly financial, to compensate for the lower standard of living. In 2020, only 17% of all doctors will work in rural areas [31].

The second inconvenience for residents of agricultural settlements became the increase in fuel and fodder prices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Being aware of the increase in discontent, the expiring memorandum of 2016 was used as a tool to defuse emotions. This document prevented the lease and purchase of land by foreigners. Already in April 2021, the president submitted a draft banning this practice [32]. Another manifestation of the desire to defuse tension in rural communities was the launch of diesel sales at lower prices in May 2021. This relieved the burden on large and medium-sized farms, which had extensive machinery. Meanwhile, the smallest growers faced the biggest problems. The drought in the western part of Kazakhstan has led to a shortage of feed, resulting in the mass death of entire herds of cattle [33]. Local breeders were asking for state intervention, in the form of the introduction of a state of natural disaster that would make it possible to apply for compensation. They also demanded the release of state reserves of fodder and its sale at reduced prices. These demands were not met, driving the small farmers to the brink of bankruptcy. It was only then that the President decided to dismiss the minister and take emergency action. The late reaction of the authorities undermined the farmers' trust in government.

Pro-social activities are implemented with funds accumulated in the National Fund of the Republic of Kazakhstan, in which surpluses from oil sales are collected. In 2001-2015, receipts to the fund amounted to \$147.5 billion. At the beginning of 2020, there was USD 61 billion in it. In six months, USD 4 billion was transferred from it to the state budget. The fund therefore acts as the main tool for resolving the budget deficit. The current balance is USD 57 billion. Despite the rapid shrinkage of reserves, the Kazakh government still envisages using these funds to implement key investments. In 2021-2023, they plan to use another USD 17 billion[34]. It should be mentioned that the low price per barrel of oil does not affect the increase in reserves. The rate of utilisation of reserves is very fast. The only way to stabilise the level of reserves is if the oil price remains above USD 75 per barrel. In such a situation, reserve assets should remain at the current level of USD 57-62 billion. The price per barrel has increased towards the end of 2021, allowing a safe level above USD 60 billion to be reached.

CONCLUSION

March 2021 marked two years since Kassym Tokayev took power, while June marked two years since he won the presidential election. At the beginning of his time in office, the president announced 106 reform initiatives to be introduced in order to heal the country's political, social and economic situation. Putting the categories in this order was no accident. The president rightly assumed that the ossified political system was an inhibitor of the transformation process, which is why the first transformations focused on political issues.

The new leader, due to his unestablished position, had to reckon with the existing links between interest groups. Going for a direct confrontation with these circles would end with the loss of power. The president could have relied on the social factor, but he was not sure whether the society would support him and, if so, whether they would not turn against him later. Tokayev was forced to juggle between citizens demanding change and interest groups guarding the old order.

The attempt to reconcile these two positions has led to half-heartedness in the reforms implemented, as the text proves. The president signed laws introducing new solutions regulating certain areas of political and social life, but they are not fully implemented in everyday life. Tokayev designed his reform programme in such a way that certain changes entail the need for transformations in other areas. Half-hearted implementation of these did not lead to the expected intentions, which in turn posed a risk to maintaining internal stability.

Answering the research questions posed, Were the reforms implemented by Kassym Jomart-Tokayev in 2019-2021 actually aimed at increasing public participation in the socio-political life of the state? Were the reforms implemented in accordance with the previous assumptions? It should be clearly stated that the reforms implemented by Kassym Jomart-Tokayev were not aimed at increasing public participation in the socio-political life of the state, and their main task was to reduce public dissatisfaction with the prevailing political and economic system, which was not achieved. This was confirmed by the outbreak of protests in January 2022, during which society demanded that the pace of reforms be accelerated. The demands had to do with the fact that only part of the promised reforms had been implemented as intended. It should not be forgotten that despite the shortcomings, these were not meaningless measures. Tokayev succeeded in creating a legal framework, the implementation of which will entail democratising changes in the future. The sine qua non is the rejuvenation of the decision-makers. Tokayev, despite being thirteen years younger than Nazarbayev, decided to implement reforms that were unacceptable to Nazarbayev.

Two years of Tokayev's rule is too short a period to make significant changes to such a complex system as Kazakhstan. The importance of Nursultan Nazarbayev in the formation of the Kazakh state is beyond dispute, as is his role in the economic

development of the country, but the system promoted by Nazarbayev years later showed many problems. Tokayev's reforms were supposed to ensure its slow modification in a direction acceptable to society, but their free development was not possible until *Elbasy's* well-deserved political retirement. Nazarbayev relinquished all his functions only after the January elections. Tokayev's dependence on Nazarbayev's decisions for two years led to the squandering of the social capital he possessed at the beginning of his term. It was no coincidence that he was called the president of hope.

The years 2019-2021 were not the best for building Tokayev's image as an effective reformer. Social protests made the leader realise the need for change. However, the request for support from the Russian Federation shows that Tokayev does not have a strong mandate inside Kazakhstan and his decisions may depend on external conditions. It is known that the Kremlin authorities are not too keen on broadening public participation in political and social life, so we should expect the continuation of the 2019-2021 model, based on the partial implementation of demands and reforms.

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