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Sociopolitical associations in independent Kazakhstan: Evolution of the phenomenon



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolution of political parties in the Republic of Kazakhstan from the time the nation gained its independence after the dissolution of the USSR to the present (1991–2016). In the 25 years that have passed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the political system in Kazakhstan has developed considerably and undergone a number of essential changes. This paper attempts to analyse the process of party construction in Kazakhstan and the factors that have influenced that process. In particular, we investigate the role of laws and constitutional reforms connected with the party system. Copyright © 2016, Far Eastern Federal University, Kangnam University, Dalian University of Technology, Kokushikan University. Production and hosting by Elsevier B.V. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s is one of the most significant world history events of the 20th century. This event's consequences include radical changes in alignment of forces in the world, particularly emergence of a number of new states.

Unlike Western countries where a history of political parties may extend back centuries, the states of the former Soviet Union had to build their political systems in a rather short time and virtually from scratch.

The experience of the Republic of Kazakhstan is very indicative of this phenomenon. This state is the ninth largest in the world in terms of area, has rich natural resources and is a key actor in the geopolitics of Central Asia. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the new country faced the need to create a system that would most adequately reflect all of the features and inquiries of the state and society. Now 25 years later, we analyse this process and answer the question: how have the problems pertaining to the creation of a political system been solved and what responses were given to imminent challenges to that process? Potential problems to the

state were rather serious. Issues with the economic system and social crises shook Kazakhstan. A list of civil wars in states of the former Soviet Union during the first half of the 1990s is illustrative of the gravity of these crises. This list includes the war in Tajikistan (1992–1997), the Ossetian–Ingush conflict (1992), the crisis in Chechnya that developed into the Chechen war (1994–1996), the war in South Ossetia (1991–1992), the civil war in Georgia (1991–1993), the war in Abkhazia (1992–1993), the war in Karabakh (1992–1994), and the war in Trans-Dniester (1992). An independent Kazakhstan could have faced similar problems, but instead it became one of few countries of the former Soviet Union that could avoid these pitfalls, largely due to a circumspect political system.

We chose to study the evolution of political parties in Kazakhstan for a number of reasons. In a democracy, political parties are undoubtedly of great importance and allow various social groups to express their interests and take part in governing the state. Consequently, it is possible to denote the role of parties as one of the most representative markers of political status in the country, in some ways mirroring the development of society.

In the course of this research, we analysed a number of key legal documents: decrees, laws, and constitutional reforms that constitute the legal basis for activity of organizations such as political parties. Party activities and the results of elections were also studied, as well as changes in society.

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This subject has not been ignored by both Kazakhstani researchers and experts from other countries. Among the most significant pieces of research, we distinguish Yu.O. Buluktayev's monograph (2012) devoted to institutionalization of political parties in Kazakhstan; Z.K. Shaukenova's monograph devoted to the ideological concept of development of Kazakhstan in which, among other things, the process of development of the political and party system is mentioned; and the article of L. Karmazina and V. Babak.

In one way or another, all of these works cover the problem considered by us and we rely on these texts for guidance. However, in this article, we seek to show our view of the evolution of the party system and the factors influencing it. In addition, we identify milestones in the phenomenon of party evolution not only from the implementation of certain keystone projects but also from tendencies in the development of Kazakhstani society.

1.1. Prerequisites for the formation of the political party system in Kazakhstan: peculiarities during the transitional phase

The seventy-year history of the Republic of Kazakhstan as a part of the Soviet Union did not include the functioning of any party except for the CPSU. This rigid one-party system was supported with corresponding ideological attitudes, which, combined with the strong power of the Centre, provided all of the socio-political mechanisms necessary for Moscow.

However, the status quo changed in the second half of the 1980s when a range of political and cultural challenges emerged. The sharp aggravation of social, international, and interfaith relations – paired with economic difficulties – were characteristic of the USSR at that time. This tension pulled a number of the Soviet republics into pieces. Kazakhstan, as well as other Soviet republics, took the disintegration of the social and political system hard. In this regard, the December events of 1986 where patriotic demonstrations of youth were suppressed by the government became an indicative and instructive illustration of the crisis evolving in the country.

The above mentioned crisis was followed by developments that, in the context of the history of independent Kazakhstan, can be characterized as positive. Among other things, these events include the raising of a national and political consciousness, which was expressed in the emergence of a significant amount of new political organizations.

The elections held in the middle of 1989 became the first real manifestation of democratic processes in Kazakhstan. Despite the absence of any real socio-political associations at that time, the mere fact that elections occurred is evidence of radical developments in the political system. The government of the country, headed by President Nursultan Abishuly Nazarbayev, started actions aimed at democratization of the society (Buluktayev, 2012, p. 11; the Law of the USSR, 1988).

From thereon, the process of forming a party system developed promptly and irrevocably. The agony of communistic ideology, the collapse of the reformation period, and the need for systemic transformation in all spheres of life were obvious at that time. By 1990, more than one thousand multiscale and multidirectional public organizations, associations, groups, councils, etc. had been formed in the country (Alimbayev, 2012).

At that time, virtually all researchers noted the importance of ecological organizations. Organizations such as the Green World, the Social-Ecological Union, the Green Movement, the Ecological Fund of the USSR, Ecology and the World, and the movement of nature preservation teams were founded in the period of 1985–1987. The well-known Nevada-Semipalatinsk Anti-Nuclear Movement, whose purpose was the termination of nuclear tests,

appeared in 1989 (Alimbayev, 2012; Buluktayev, 2012, c. 12; Babak, 2005, p. 88).

It should be noted that the activity of ecological organizations that were formed in the second half of the 1980s was quite politicized. In the conditions of a one-party system, ecological movements represented the forerunners of political parties by appealing to one of the fastest evolving and painful problems of Kazakhstani society. It is not incidental that political parties, which appeared later in the early 1990s, had their own declared ecological agendas (Political parties ... 1994b, editions 1–2).

The Association of Independent Public Organizations of Kazakhstan, which was founded at the end of 1989, included branches of the Democratic Union and Memorial, Nevada-Semipalatinsk, Doveriye, the Green Front, the Initiative, Birlesu Independent Labour Union, and other organizations. The activity of these organizations already had an obvious politicized nature.

In response, the Kazakhstani government made attempts to regulate the spontaneous formation of political organizations. On April 14, 1989, the state published the text “On the procedure of education and activity of self-regulatory public associations,” a Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. Later, on April 24, 1990, a number of amendments were introduced to the Constitution of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, including the following: “Citizens of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic have the right to unite into political and public organizations that promote the development of political and independent activity, as well as satisfaction of their diverse interests. The conditions for successful performance of their statutory goals are guaranteed to them.”

On March 14, 1990, the Supreme Council of the USSR cancelled the sixth article of the Constitution of the USSR, stating: “The Communist Party of the Soviet Union is the leading and directing force of the Soviet society, the core of its political system, state, and public organizations.” On October 9, 1990, the law “On Public Associations” was adopted. This law represented a certain legal basis for the organization and regulation of public organizations appearing en masse not only in Kazakhstan but also across the entire territory of the Soviet Union. The law legalized the right for parties to exist at the country-level. On October 25, 1990, the declaration “On the State Sovereignty of Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic” was published, after which laws of the republic gained priority over laws of the Union.

The law on public associations was published on June 27, 1991. According to this law, public associations are created “for the purpose of exercise and protection of political, economic, social and cultural rights and freedoms; development of activity and independent actions of citizens, their participation in management of state and public affairs; satisfaction of professional and amateur interests; development of scientific, technical and art creativity, protection of human life and health, ecological safety of the population; participation in charity, carrying out cultural-educational and sports and health work, preservation of nature, historical and cultural monuments; patriotic and humanistic education; expansion of international relations, strengthening of peace and friendship between the people.” This law was initially imperfect. In particular, it did not note distinctions between political parties and other public associations of citizens other than formal recognition of these public associations as political parties.

Kazakhstan gained its independence on December 16, 1991 under the Constitutional law “On Independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan.” By April–May, 1990, the Alash National Freedom Party, Zheltoksan National Democratic Party, and Social Democratic Party of Kazakhstan were already established.

The main programme objectives of Alash were the achievement of real independence for Kazakhstan; promotion of the idea of

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