



Senior Fellow for Eurasia and Director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at the AFPC Svante E. Cornell discusses reforms in Kazakhstan

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While the EU and US are preoccupied with the Ukraine war, they should pay attention to events in Central Asia as well, where on Sunday (5 June) a package of constitutional amendments is expected to be approved by referendum in Kazakhstan, write Svante E. Cornell and Albert Barro.

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The proposed constitutional changes, following five months after the greatest unrest in the country's modern history, accelerate the efforts by the country's president to push for controlled political reforms. The EU, while focusing on Ukraine, should continue to engage with strategically important Central Asia.

In January this year, protests over energy price hikes spread in Kazakhstan and turned violent in the country's largest city of Almaty. This crisis displayed the growing restlessness of the Kazakh population, but also the in-fighting among the country's elites.

It seems clear that the violence was triggered by elites that resisted President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's political reforms to safeguard their privileges.

However, President Tokayev emerged from the crisis with greater authority over the country's governing institutions. The price to pay was calling on peacekeepers from the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation.

But while many believed this would leave Tokayev indebted to Russia, events since January have proven otherwise. President Tokayev has refused to endorse Russia's war in Ukraine. At home, far from halting his reform efforts, he doubled down: On 6 March he presented a fast-tracked package of political reforms to the nation and promptly submitted it to a constitutional referendum scheduled for 5 June.

The constitutional amendments, approved on Sunday, are closely consistent with the reform initiatives promised by Tokayev in his 16 March address to the nation.

Key themes from his address that are reflected in the amendments include revisions to the president's powers, reformatting of the representative branch of government, improvements to the electoral system, and strengthening of human rights institutions.

Recognising that much of January's unrest arose in protest against the government's "super-presidential" structure, Tokayev's reforms aim to reduce the power of the presidency. The president will no longer be permitted to be connected to a political party during his tenure, and his close relatives will be forbidden from serving as senior public servants or as heads of public sector institutions. Furthermore, the president forfeits the right to cancel actions by regional mayors.

Reducing presidential power is matched with the strengthening of parliament. Presidential appointments will now require Senate approval, and the Supreme Audit Chamber, which will oversee the national budget, is to report biannually to the lower house of parliament.

Furthermore, while in the past, the upper house adopted laws, this is now shifted to the more representative lower house, reducing the senate's role in approving laws passed in the lower chamber.

This shift is magnified by introducing a mixed electoral system for the lower house, with 30% elected in single-member districts and 70% by party lists. Steps are also being taken to lower the obstacles to forming new political parties.

The amendments address several human rights issues too. A key amendment is the establishment of a Constitutional Court to which citizens, along with the Prosecutor General and Human Rights Commissioner, can appeal directly to challenge violations of constitutional rights. The Prosecutor General and Human Rights Commissioner also receive greater independence from other state bodies or officials.

Some initiatives that President Tokayev promised in his March address to the nation are not included in the amendments. A key area is the clarification of the rights and responsibilities of the media.

One of the most pernicious criticisms of Kazakhstan's record concerns the rights of journalists, who are often persecuted under defamation laws. Tokayev promised a draft law on the media, which will be met with great anticipation.

The changes to Kazakhstan's political system will not turn the country into a parliamentary democracy anytime soon. They remain within the fundamental paradigm that has been President Tokayev's intention since his election in 2019: top-led gradual change to the existing system to make government more effective and provide greater openness without losing control.

Still, compared to Tokayev's earlier reform packages, these reforms represent a shift: earlier reforms sought mainly to make the state deliver better services to the people and shore up its legitimacy that way.

They only aimed to build participatory and competitive politics very slowly at the local level. By contrast, the current reform package indicates that President Tokayev now sees a gradual liberalisation of the political system at all levels as necessary for the system to maintain its legitimacy.

While the EU and US are preoccupied with the Ukraine war, they should pay attention to events in Central Asia. Following the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the region has largely disappeared from the sights of Western policymakers.

This is a mistake, as the region will be crucial to the long-term containment of both Russia and China. Supporting reform processes in Kazakhstan and its neighbour Uzbekistan, particularly the difficult implementation of reforms that are now on the books, would go a long way to helping stability and progress in the region.

A longer analysis of Kazakhstan's reforms can be found [here](#).

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