



# CACI director and AFPC Senior fellow for Eurasia Svante Cornell quoted in Voice of America article regarding Kazakhstan's June 5 national referendum

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Kazakh Reforms Get Mixed Reviews From Analysts, Critics

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WASHINGTON —

A package of constitutional reforms billed as strengthening Kazakhstan's parliament and reining in presidential powers is getting mixed reviews from analysts and opposition members, who say the changes are welcome but fall far short of bringing real democracy to the oil-rich Central Asian nation.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and his administration insist that the changes, approved in a June 5 national referendum, are just the beginning of a steady, long-term process that will usher in a "New Kazakhstan."

FILE - In this photo released by Kazakhstan's Presidential Press Service, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev speaks to reporters after voting in the Al-Farabi Schoolchildren Palace in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, June 5, 2022.

"Amendments have now been made to 33 articles that make up more than a third of the Constitution," said Roman Vassilenko, deputy foreign minister.

Speaking at a recent George Washington University forum, [Vassilenko confirmed](#) that the amendments, approved with 77% of the vote, went into force on June 8.

"Changes include reducing the powers of the presidency with the aim of establishing an influential parliament and accountable government," he said. "The president will no longer be a member of any political party and will no longer have the authority to overrule the acts of local leaders."

Vassilenko said the president's immediate family are now barred from holding political posts and top managerial positions in quasi-public companies. The provision will apply retroactively to former President Nursultan Nazarbayev and his family, who acquired vast financial assets during his time in office.

## Better checks and balances

"The reforms will enhance checks and balances, strengthen parliament and the independence of governors and mayors, and create the legal basis to tackle corruption and nepotism," Vassilenko said.

The amendments should also make it easier for political parties to register, though opposition leaders doubt they will now be able to challenge the ruling party in any meaningful way.

Other reforms promised by Tokayev include a pledge to protect human rights while strengthening national security, the restoration of a constitutional court, and the abolition of the death penalty.

The reforms come in response to a wave of anti-government protests in January sparked by a sharp spike in fuel prices after government controls were lifted. Officials acknowledged more than 230 people were killed and thousands were arrested as the violence spread and other long-standing grievances were aired.

FILE - A sculpture of a Kazakhstani man is seen in front of the city hall building in the central square blocked by Kazakhstan troops and police in Almaty, Kazakhstan, Jan. 11, 2022. Authorities in Kazakhstan said nearly 8,000 people were detained by police during protests that descended into violence.

The protests "were a major shock and major test for Kazakhstan, and relevant lessons were learned and are being learned," Vassilenko said.

Defending the gradual nature of the reforms, he said what Kazakhstan needs "is not a revolution but evolution of the country's political processes and governance. And due to our geographical and historical background, as well as the challenging geopolitical situation in the world today, overhauling our political system too rapidly ... could actually undermine our efforts and potentially lead to destabilization."

Independent analysts, however, are taking a wait-and-see approach, noting that other post-Soviet political systems have proven very resistant to change.

"The most regressive forces in these countries are very often the security services. We see allegations about their role in the January events in Kazakhstan," said [Svante Cornell](#), director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute (CACI).

Cornell argues that revolutionary changes in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere "did not turn out the way people expected. They were not the gateway to functioning sustainable democracies."

### **Similar situation**

Cornell compares Kazakhstan to neighboring Uzbekistan, which its reform-promising government also calls "New Uzbekistan." Both fear revolutionary changes that could lead to instability.

Still, Cornell sees Kazakhs as more demanding than Uzbeks and believes Kazakhstan's elite realize that economic development requires systemic transformation.

"But Kazakhstan is not going to turn into a parliamentary democracy," he said at a CACI forum, asserting that the latest reforms "are designed to make the government more effective and to provide some degree of greater openness without losing control of the political system."

Nargis Kassenova, a senior fellow at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University, sees the reforms as a bid by Tokayev to legitimize himself three years after succeeding Nazarbayev in a 2019 election that few believe was democratic.

Kassenova said some Kazakhs give Tokayev the benefit of the doubt. "They appreciate the intentions and recognize the lack of better alternatives and actually the presence of much worse alternatives."

Beyond that, she said, "removing Nazarbayev, his family and closest associates from the core of the system, stripping them of assets is a big deal. And that's an area to watch: What is going to happen to the assets? Will they just change hands, or will there be more equitable redistribution in the country?"

"Politics as public engagement is back and people do pay attention to what the government is saying and doing," she said. "I think there is a genuine opening. And being fully skeptical and disengaged would be a wasting a good opportunity."

Domestic critics of the government, however, say the Tokayev administration is unlikely to allow any space for real political challengers.

Kazakh activist Assem Zhapsheva, co-founder of Masa.media and "Til Kespek Joq," a social media platform, is among those who say the constitutional amendments "do not change the super-presidential form of government in any way."

Zhapsheva argued that the referendum was neither free nor fair, nor was it the beginning of real reforms. She believes Tokayev is merely testing the public to prepare for re-election in 2024.

"Despite claims that Tokayev wants an independent parliament or independent parties to join the parliament, we've seen over the years —and it's still happening — independent politicians who want to create their own parties are under much pressure."

### **No accounting for excesses**

Kazakh journalist Aigerim Toleukhanova said there has still been no legal accounting for government excesses, specifically on the January events. "Some lost their loved ones. Some were injured or tortured."

Toleukhanova puts no stock in official claims that regional geopolitics require Kazakhstan to be vigilant. She urges the government to build trust with society instead of prioritizing its international image.

Vassilenko said Tokayev is committed to ensuring a thorough investigation of the January events, including allegations of torture. Human rights groups have called for an independent inquiry.

But Zhapsheva argued that Tokayev can't build a new Kazakhstan using old methods of governance and control. "Our officials need to understand that people who ask for justice are actually asking for real reforms and are not the enemies of the state."

She challenged the government to return "all the stolen money to Kazakhstan" and hold Nazarbayev and his network accountable for illegal actions and offshore assets. Only then, she said, can Kazakhstan's people start seeing real change