

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



June 11, 2019

Kazakhstan And A New Chapter of Regional Constructive Interaction

On June 9, citizens of Kazakhstan went to the polls for an early presidential election and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev won a sweeping victory in a presidential election, with taking 70.8 percent of the vote in Sunday's election.

Nazarbayev who has ruled Kazakhstan for 29 years, announced his retirement in March. Nazarbayev has served as independent Kazakhstan's leader since its inception in 1991 and was named the first president of Kazakhstan prior to independence by the Supreme Soviet in April 1990. Thus, the presidential change in Kazakhstan will be the first of its kind in almost 30 years. Therefore, presidential election will be a defining moment of 21st century Kazakhstan. The election will affect political life at all levels and citizen interaction with their government for years to come.

The Fate of Nazarbayev

Nazarbayev, who had led the oil-rich republic for almost three decades before stepping down in March, will retain specific powers. Nazarbayev will hold the official title of Yelbasy, or national leader, and will continue to run the ruling Nur Otan party.

Radical elements pursuing to destabilize Kazakhstan

As many other Asian countries, there are "foreign-based" opposition figures in Kazakhstan, who try to leave no stones unturned to destabilize Kazakhstan. They did their best to encourage voters to boycott the poll. These radical figures funded and supported by certain foreign countries have a harsh interpretation of Islam and want to establish a hardline regime in Kazakhstan. They try to detach Kazakhstan from the regional and international community and stop the development pace in the country and keep it back ward and isolated from other parts of the world.

Promoting Dialogue

Citizens discontent is a positive phenomenon if managed properly. In Kazakhstan like any other countries, there are people who urge the government to further open up to the world and more involve the citizens in political decision making process. Considering the importance of the integration of the public mass in the national governance in general, and especially the youth, Tokayev has promised to set up a "special committee" to promote dialogue between the citizens including the young activists critical of the government. This mechanism will pave the way for an equal dialogue between the people and authorities.

The Way Forward

Tokayev has promised to continue to take guidance from Nazarbayev on strategic matters. Such arrangement under which Nazarbayev effectively remains in charge ensures policy continuity and it also ensures political certainty in Kazakhstan.

On the foreign policy side, Tokayev, who has studied at an elite Soviet diplomatic school in Moscow and focused on China, is likely to continue Nazarbayev's policy of balancing between Russia, China and the West. That will ensure the engagement of the foreign energy and mining companies that have invested hundreds of billions of dollars in Kazakhstan. Such approach has helped Kazakhstan to play a vital role in the region to bridge the gaps between these powers. This policy has helped Kazakhstan attract foreign investment and open up its markets for its oil and metals exports.

Conclusion

Kazakhstan enjoys a vital geopolitical role in the Central Asia. It has taken good EURASIA initiatives and has played a vital role to close the gap between Russia, China and The West. A smooth political transfer will ensure the continuation of this approach in the future. It will not only ensure the continuation of Kazakhstan political and economic development, but also will ensure the constructive engagement of Russia, China and the West in the region. Last but not the least, the good news of smooth power transfer in Kazakhstan is highly welcomed by Afghans. Because it ensures them of continuing the constructive mutual cooperation between the two nations that they will be further strengthened in the future.

Voters Registration is a Major Step towards Holding Presidential Election

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

According to media reports, the Afghan electoral officials have just commenced supplementary voters registering program ahead of presidential election scheduled for September of the current year. The enrollment program will be continued for twenty days covering individuals who have newly returned to Afghanistan or who complete the age of eighteen on Election Day or whose names have not been correctly entered in the previous voter list or moved from one area to other. According to the officials, those who previously registered but their names were missing in the voters list could also visit voter registration centers. Also, those who have gotten their voter stickers on national ID cards damaged could visit voter registration centers but the stickers already issued in Ghazni are not valid.

The main challenge to the election process is security issues in the country. According to official statistics from the Ministry of Interior 19 districts across the country are currently in control of the Taliban. While according to former Cigar reports the government has domination over 226 districts from total 407 districts which overall contain 65% of Afghanistan's population. These statistics show that many Afghans were deprived of their right to vote and could not register in previous elections.

Currently, a total of 2,002 polling centers for the September election will not open because of security threats, as IEC officials said on Saturday. Thus, the official was quoted that a total of 7,385 polling centers have been registered in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan, of which 5,383 centers will open which means 27 percent of the polling centers will remain closed during the Election Day. Nevertheless, the Registration program is open in 33 provinces and 247 centers in Ghazni where parliamentary election failed to take place.

According to IEC officials, there is no possibility of opening polling centers where already deemed to remain closed. A total of 18 candidates including incumbent president Ashraf Ghani have registered to run in the upcoming election. Violence across Afghanistan continues despite six rounds of talks between US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and the Taliban. The Taliban have previously carried out attacks targeting elections and election campaign resulted the 2018 parliamentary elections was the deadliest for civilians.

Anyway, the Independent Election Commission has launched the enrollment process so as to ensure that no eligible voters may not be deprived from their right to vote. The start of this process is a major step forward in holding the presidential election and will increase the hope of holding timely elections. In the other words, with this practical step the election process is becoming more serious and the doubts about holding the presidential election will also be eliminated. Accordingly, with the announcement of the presidential election schedule and secondly, start of the voter registration process, the responsibilities of the election commission's are more specified to making the election commission move ahead with its announced calendar.

As the presidential elections will be held on September of current year; therefore, all preparations must be made within the same timeframe, and the slowdown and procrastination of the electoral bodies should not delay the electoral process. However, the election process has already delayed and there are still challenges and questions that can cause the people doubt about the process. Therefore, the elections commissions need to note the following points in order to meet their designed electoral goals.

First, the people awareness and motivations had been considered as a main part of election program in the past elections but in the last parliamentary elections and also in coming presidential elections it has either decreased or removed from the process. The awareness-raising programs encourage the citizens to participate in the election, and, on the other hand, it aware the people about role and effects of election on their social and political lives. In the last election, a part of the problems that reduced the level of people's participation was a lack of proper awareness and short period of time for campaign. Undoubtedly, if the elections commissions had provided enough information to the public through video, audio and print media, and encouraged them to vote, the number of people in the election was undoubtedly higher than that we saw. Therefore, if the Electoral Commission needs to include it as a significant part of its work plans and regularly calls people to the polls.

Second, the Presidential candidates, election bodies and other stakeholders should assist election commissions with providing constructive consultation in the election process. They should diagnose the weaknesses and shortcomings of the commissions which may harm the transparency of the elections. The Presidential candidates can play a very essential role in raising political awareness and make people more hopeful about their future. We should note that good election campaign is as important as election itself as it increases the level of political understanding in the country. Hence, the election commissions should allocate enough time for election campaign.

Lastly, Elections are the most important national programs which determine future of the nation. If we choose a wrong medical doctor we may kill only one body or few bodies but if we choose a wrong political doctor we may kill or destroy the future of entire nation. For that reason, people must be taught about the importance of elections as no good decision will be made in the darkness. They must know that nothing can replace election. The only alternatives to election are only war, sovereignty of ethnic and family-oriented system and overall social and political disorder. The people of Afghanistan have experienced all those situations in past and have endured their bloody and harmful consequences. Undoubtedly, people do not want to repeat the unfortunate circumstances of the past. So, the only way to overcome the unpleasant situations is to promote the values of democracy and people's awareness in the country.

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Europe's Silent Majority Speaks Out

By: George Soros

Last month's elections to the European Parliament produced better results than one could have expected, and for a simple reason: the silent pro-European majority has spoken. What they said is that they want to preserve the values on which the European Union was founded, but that they also want radical changes in the way the EU functions. Their main concern is climate change.

This favors the pro-European parties, especially the Greens. The anti-European parties, which cannot be expected to do anything constructive, failed to make the gains that they expected. Nor can they form the united front that they would need in order to become more influential.

One of the institutions that needs to be changed is the Spitzenkandidat system. It is supposed to provide a form of indirect selection of the EU leadership. In fact, as Franklin Dehousse has explained in a brilliant but pessimistic article in the EU Observer, it is worse than no democratic selection at all. Each member state has real political parties, but their trans-European combination produces artificial constructs that serve no purpose other than to promote the personal ambitions of their leaders.

This can best be seen in the European People's Party (EPP), which has managed to capture the presidency of the Commission since 2004. The EPP's current leader, Manfred Weber, who has no experience in a national government, appears willing to enter into practically any compromise in order to remain in the parliamentary majority. That includes embracing Hungary's autocratic prime minister, Viktor Orbán.

Orbán has posed a serious problem for Weber, because Orbán has openly flouted European norms and established what amounts to a mafia state. Nearly half the national parties constituting the EPP wanted to expel Orbán's party, Fidesz. Instead of following through, however, Weber managed to convince the EPP to make a relatively easy demand on Fidesz: allow the Central European University (CEU, which I founded) to continue functioning freely in Hungary as an American university.

Fidesz failed to comply. Even so, the EPP did not expel Fidesz, but merely suspended it so that it could be counted as part of the EPP when the president of the Commission is chosen. Orbán is now trying to reestablish Fidesz as a bona fide member of the EPP. It will be interesting to see if Weber finds a way to accommodate him.

The Spitzenkandidat system is not based on an intergovernmental agreement, so it could easily be changed. It would be much better if the president of the European Commission were directly elected from a carefully selected list of qualified candidates, but that would require treaty changes. The President of the European Council could continue to be elected by a qualified majority of the member states, as the Treaty of Lisbon prescribes.

The reform that would require treaty changes is justified by the increased democratic legitimacy conferred by the European Parliamentary elections. Turnout in the recent election surpassed 50%, up sharply from 42.6% in 2014. This is the first time that turnout has increased at all since the first election in 1979, when 62% of eligible voters participated.

Strangely enough, on this occasion, the Spitzenkandidat system promises to produce a dream team. French President Emmanuel Macron, who is opposed to the Spitzenkandidat system as a matter of principle, is largely responsible for this development. At a dinner with Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, the winner of Spain's national general election, which preceded the European Parliament vote, the two leaders agreed to support two Spitzenkandidaten who would be ideal for the Commission and for the Council.

Germany is the main supporter of the Spitzenkandidat system. If Weber loses out, Germany will be pushing for Jens Weidmann, President of the Bundesbank, to become President of the ECB. He would hardly be ideal. In fact, he is disqualified by the fact that he testified before Germany's Federal Constitutional Court against the ECB in a case seeking to invalidate the Bank's so-called outright monetary transactions, a policy that was crucial to overcoming the eurozone crisis earlier this decade. I hope this fact will become more widely known. Any other qualified candidate would be preferable to Weidmann as ECB president. As things stand now, France will not have any of the top jobs. It would be a good thing if Germany didn't have one either, because it would leave more room for other countries.

There are many EU institutions aside from the Spitzenkandidat system that require radical reform. But that can wait until we find out whether, and to what extent, the promise held out by the parliamentary election results is realized. This is not yet the time to declare victory, relax, and celebrate. There is a lot of work to be done to turn the EU into a well-functioning organization that fulfills its great potential. George Soros is Chairman of Soros Fund Management and of the Open Society Foundations.




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