

HIGHLIGHTS

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Political Developments

Inaugurating the new Parliament, elections to which were held on 19th March, 2023, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said: "This is just the beginning of a long journey. Reforms aimed at improving the political system will continue." He pointed out that Kazakhstan is the only country in a comparable geopolitical situation carrying out such profound reforms. After a year of political liberalization and constitutional reform, any thought that the pace of change in Kazakhstan was about to slow down was firmly rejected by Tokayev in his speech. "Our movement towards democratization of political processes, further increasing the participation of citizens in public administration will continue", he said. The President proposed Mr Smailov's reappointment as Prime Minister of the country and the latter was duly re-elected.

Kazakhstan's ruling party won a commanding majority in snap parliamentary elections on 19th March, 2023 that were somewhat marred by a low turnout and what international observers called "discrepancies" in the conduct of the vote. Tokayev had brought forward the ballot from 2025, saying it marked the final stage of a government "reset" in response to deadly riots last year. Seven parties, including two newly-registered ones, competed for 69 party-list seats in the 98-member parliament, with the remainder filled by the winners of new single-mandate contests that are part of Tokayev's shake-up of the legislature.

The ruling Amanat party received 53.9% of the ballots, leading the second-highest vote-getter by 43%. Turnout was estimated at around 54% with Almaty, the largest city recording just 26% of eligible votes cast, far below the 63% participation in previous parliamentary elections under Tokayev in 2021. "While Amanat got a bit more than 50%, this doesn't change anything as the other parties are mini-Amanats," said Dosym Satpayev, director of the Almaty-based Risk

Assessment Group. Although observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said “contestants campaigned actively and freely” in the Sunday elections, they also expressed some concerns about the ballot. Tokayev, 69, has moved to dismantle the legacy of his long-serving predecessor Nursultan Nazarbayev following unrest in January 2022 that the president denounced as an attempted coup. To help put down the violence, he called in Russian troops and then revised the constitution to restrict the presidency to one seven-year term before winning 81% in snap elections in November, 2022. In the 2021 parliamentary elections, the ruling Nur Otan party founded by Nazarbayev won 76 seats. It changed its name to Amanat last year. All but one party that took part in the elections passed the 5% threshold to enter parliament, including an upstart group formed just a few months before the elections.

At stake now is Tokayev’s ability to push ahead with a contentious agenda that includes structural reforms and an effort to take on vested interests by targeting assets linked to Nazarbayev’s family. Besides arrests that put into custody Karim Masimov, an ex-prime minister, and Nazarbayev’s nephew, Tokayev has also barred close relatives of the president from taking posts in government and state-run companies. More than a year after crushing the riots with the help of troops sent by President Vladimir Putin, Tokayev hasn’t backed Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in return for its help. Instead, the Kazakh president has sought to strengthen ties to the European Union and the US to try to reduce Kazakhstan’s dependence on Moscow.

The mass public engagement that was alluded to in the run-up to the snap vote was somehow missing. A senior advisor to Tokayev said that the political reforms being carried out by Tokayev presage “the renewal of a system of social values, the awakening of civic activity and have contributed to the involvement of citizens in the process of the country’s radical transformation.” The main argument advanced by officials for this election was that it would usher in a more diverse parliament. Two new parties were registered in the past few months and, in the most important novelty, 29 of the 98 elected representatives to the Majilis, the lower house of parliament, were self-nominated and picked by single-member constituencies. The idea of that provision was that some winning candidates might turn out to be independent-thinking types beholden to no party interests.

A great deal was at stake for the country’s rulers in this election. Tokayev’s supporters presented this as a historic reset of the system created by his predecessor Nursultan Nazarbayev, who stepped down in 2019 but retained important behind-the-scenes influence. The legacy of that president’s blend of authoritarian rule and cronyism contributed in large part to the unanticipated wave of protests that shook Kazakhstan in the first few days of 2022. Some Observers stated that “these elections are no different from the previous ones, which were held under Nazarbayev. [We are seeing] endemic violations of the law and of the rights of independent observers. We did not see any ‘New Kazakhstan’ today.”

Uzbekistan will hold a Referendum on its new Constitution on 30th April, 2023. The amendments changing the constitution are expected to be approved in the referendum by a majority of the country which will "nullify" Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's previous and current terms, allowing him to run for another two consecutive terms. The draft also extends the duration of the Presidential term from five to seven years. Mirziyoev's current term ends in 2026. The amendments will change about two-thirds of the constitution, with the number of articles in the document rising to 155 from 128. The draft also declares that Uzbekistan will be "a social state" while almost tripling the state's obligations to the citizens. The changes to the constitution were initiated by Mirziyoev last summer. Among other things, the proposed amendments at the time included abolishing Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic's right to secede. However, Mirziyoev dropped the idea to change Karakalpakstan's status after thousands of Karakalpaks protested in early July last year against the elimination of Karakalpakstan's long-standing right to seek independence from Uzbekistan, from the constitution. The referendum, on April 30 will be the third referendum in the history of independent Uzbekistan. Mirziyoev's predecessor, the country's late first President Islam Karimov, who died in 2016, held two referendums in 1995 and 2002 prolonging his terms without elections and changing the length of presidential terms.

Tajikistan's government has created a dress code for women advising them not to wear black or wear Islamic-influenced garments such as the hijab. In addition, the code also forbids "semi-nude European attire" such as synthetics, tight pants, miniskirts, blouses, nightgowns, thin dresses or sandals in public. The campaign called "we dress in the Tajik style" is being advertised with the intention that women wear the traditional garments of Tajikistan. Most of the nine million Tajiks are Muslims whose practices are under surveillance due to the government's fear of a possible Islamic insurgency inspired by Afghanistan.

President of Tajikistan received the Secretary General of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Imangali Tasmagambetov. During the conversation, the President of Tajikistan highlighted the "importance of the increasing cooperation in the political dimension, expanding the international activities of the CSTO, and increasing the effectiveness of military, military-technical and military-economic cooperation". He further stressed the importance of strengthening the comprehensive work to counter challenges and threats to security, in particular, terrorism, extremism, radicalism, drug smuggling, cybercrime, and transnational organized crime.

On March 27, during a meeting with a member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Secretary of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Ma Xingrui, Kazakh President Tokayev said that Kazakhstan seeks to deepen cooperation with China based on strategic partnership and eternal friendship. Xingrui said, "Kazakhstan and China have close economic relations" and announced China's readiness to intensify mutually beneficial cooperation in agriculture, industry, energy, logistics, education, innovation, and other sectors.

Saudi Arabia approved a Memorandum of Understanding that grants the Kingdom the status of a Dialogue Partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Economic Developments

Kyrgyzstan said that it is poised to reach an agreement with Russia to import 875 million kilowatt hours of power in 2023-24, an amount equivalent to more than 5 percent of annual national consumption. This agreement with Russia is part of a broader plan of Kyrgyzstan to import up to 2.2 billion kWh of electricity this year. In 2021, the most recent year for which there is complete data, Kyrgyzstan produced 15 billion kWh and consumed 16.3 billion kWh. The need for imports only deepened last year, when Kyrgyzstan bought 2.8 billion kWh. This year, Kyrgyzstan turned to its neighbors to top up supplies. In January, Kyrgyzstan paid \$4 million to import 138.6 million kWh of electricity from Kazakhstan. A month later, it began to receive deliveries of electricity from Turkmenistan under a deal to import 1.6 billion kWh from that country.

As the International Energy Agency has found, heavy subsidies of electricity have made it unaffordable for Kyrgyzstan to properly maintain and invest in preserving and upgrading production and transmission capacity. That is particularly unfortunate since, as the IEA has also said, "it is estimated that rehabilitation and modernization can save up to 25% of electricity."

After a recent report stated that officials in Brussels are considering imposing trade restrictions on certain Central Asian countries due to suspicions of aiding Russia in circumventing Western sanctions, Kazakhstan announced that it would launch an online system to monitor all goods entering and leaving the country until they reach their final destination. Despite not applying direct sanctions or restrictions in trade with Russia, a senior Kazakh official said that the monitoring would ensure that the country does not become an avenue for the circumvention of Western sanctions. The 're-export' practice commonly referred as "parallel imports" involves companies that share a customs union with Russia, like Kazakhstan to buy goods from Western firms which are then transported to the country, which then the companies 're-export' to Russia.

Kazakhstan will cut oil production by 78,000 barrels per day from May, following the latest agreement reached by the OPEC Plus countries on April 2. The group of OPEC nations were expected to stick to its already agreed 2m barrels per day cuts. However, they committed to additional oil output cuts of around 1.16 million barrels per day during their meeting. The voluntary cuts will last through the end of 2023 with the aim to stabilize the oil market.

Kazakhstan's flagship airline, Air Astana, is speeding up its expansion plans to take advantage of a drop in air traffic via Russia and the reopening of China. Many global airlines stopped flights to Russia after it invaded Ukraine last year. As a result, Moscow has lost its status as a hub for flights between Europe and Asia, allowing Kazakhstan to boost its market share.

India-Central Asia Developments

At the SCO Meeting of the National Security Advisors/Secretaries of National Security Councils in New Delhi, Indian NSA Ajit Doval said India's approach is in sync with the SCO Charter to ensure comprehensive and balanced economic growth "for integration into the global economy and improvement of transit capabilities." He said that terrorism and its financing were among the most serious threats to global peace and security and that all acts of terror, regardless of motivation, were unjustifiable. Doval added that SCO members should "respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity" and seek "no unilateral military superiority in adjacent areas". He said that India was ready to cooperate on investing and building connectivity in the region, but cautioned that it was important to ensure that such initiatives were "consultative, transparent and participatory".

While the issue of territorial integrity has been raised by India earlier, the issue of "unilateral military superiority in adjacent areas" was raised for the first time. Doval said that India is committed to including Iran's Chabahar port within the framework of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

Representatives of Pakistan and China participated in the meeting via a video link.

The 20th Session of Culture Ministers of the SCO Member States was organized by India in which the Member States participated virtually. The Ministers expressed their views on enhancing cooperation in the field of culture within the SCO Framework. Minister of Culture of Kyrgyzstan said that cultural cooperation creates a fundamental basis for further development and strengthening mutual understanding. The member states signed a Protocol and noted the role of joint activities in the sphere of culture and art as a platform for expanding intercultural exchanges and deepening mutual understanding.

The eighteenth meeting of the Chief Justices/Chairpersons of the Supreme Courts of the SCO Member States was held in New Delhi on March 10-11, 2023. The two-day meeting saw the participation of all SCO member states, two observer states (Iran and Belarus), the SCO, Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), and the SCO Secretariat. Justice of Pakistan Supreme Court addressed the conference virtually. Chief Justice of India stressed that SCO member states should strive for judicial cooperation to make their judicial systems more approachable to people. Furthermore, he argued that the conference "allows all member and observer states to reflect on the challenges common to their jurisdictions". On the theme of 'smart courts', the head of the Court Administration of Kazakhstan offered insight into his country's new software which was developed post-Covid-19 to make the electronic system in judicial services more accessible. Chief Judge of the case-filing division of the Supreme People's Court of China said that there was great importance for the "growth of the judiciary that modern public judicial services were built

featuring inclusiveness, equity, convenience, efficiency, intelligence and accuracy” which is a global challenge that needs to be addressed both nationally and collectively.

A seminar was organized in the context of India’s current Presidency of the SCO to exchange best practices in the fields of military medicine, healthcare and combating pandemics. The theme was chosen on the basis of contributions made by different armed forces over the past two-and-a-half years in countering Covid-19 by providing isolation wards, emergency healthcare equipment, and assisting in vaccination programmes in remote areas. Since the armed forces of SCO states are usually among the first responders in dealing with such issues, a conference of think tanks was planned to focus on how the eight members of the grouping could respond to future challenges. Prior to the Seminar, the Pakistani delegation used a wrong map that showed Kashmir as part of Pakistan. After the matter came to the external affairs ministry’s notice, the Pakistani side was asked to show the correct map or to stay away from the seminar. The delegation chose to stay away. At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in September 2020, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval had walked out of a virtual meeting of top SCO security officials after the Pakistani representative projected a map that inaccurately depicted the borders of the two countries. At the time, the external affairs ministry accused the Pakistani side of deliberately using a “fictitious map that Pakistan” had been propagating. The Indian side had also formally protested over the matter to Russia, which chaired the SCO in 2020, saying it amounted to a blatant violation of the grouping’s charter and went against all norms for safeguarding sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states. India is set to host the SCO defence ministers’ meeting in April and the SCO foreign ministers’ meeting in May, 2023.

Iran announced that it would attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a full member during India’s Presidency. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi will attend the SCO Summit in India where the process of Iran’s membership is expected to be completed.

India and Uzbekistan conducted a joint military exercise DUSTLIK (meaning friendship in Uzbek language) in Pithoragarh, Uttarakhand, India. Both the countries exhibited their combat power and dominance in the joint military exercise while understanding nuances of fighting multi-domain operations in the sub-conventional scenarios. The 15-day exercise exhibited their combat power and dominance while understanding nuances of fighting multi-domain operations in the sub-conventional scenarios. This was the fourth edition of the biennial military exercise. The exercise provided an opportunity for both the armed forces to train in sub-conventional operations in a joint environment under the United Nations Charter. It was stated that “both nations share a common goal to exterminate terrorism and bring peace to the world. Exercise between India and Uzbekistan is a platform where the two armies joined hands to share and learn tactics, techniques & procedures.” The military contingents of the two countries carried out a joint operation to eliminate a rebel group by destroying a terrorist training camp. During the entire duration of the exercise, the Indian and Uzbekistan Armed forces displayed the highest standards of professional conduct, tactical acumen and military discipline.

Ambassador of the Kyrgyz Republic to India Askar Beshimov presented his credentials to India's President Droupadi Murmu. During the meeting, the two discussed topical issues of further developing the traditionally friendly Kyrgyz-India strategic partnership relations. H.E. Askar Beshimov stressed the importance of India in the current world political processes considering India's presidency at the SCO and the G20. It was confirmed that Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov would participate in the SCO summit in July 2023.

The previous issues of Central Asia Digest are available here: [LINK](#)

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COMMENTS