

Kazakhstan at the Crossroads: Democratic Imperatives, Leadership and Exigency of Transition

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Abstract

Since Kazakhstan's attainment of independent political identity in 1991, debates on exigency of democratic transition have gone off in multiple directions. However, the systemic transition remained smooth with the introduction of extensive political and economic reforms, keeping people's interest at the centre. At that time, democratization and liberalization were twin-strategic priorities of Kazakhstan. Until recently, Kazakhstan has succeeded in maintaining robust economic performance, stable fiscal condition, and formidable trade relations with major, regional as well as extra-regional powers. Yet the project of democratization is underway, thickening the qualm over Kazakhstan's transition to democracy. Even transition of power after snap presidential election held on June 9, 2019 has raised multiple questions regarding future trajectory of Kazakh politics. To what extent the shift of power will help Kazakhstan to deepen and broaden the base of democracy remains a matter of solemn contestation among academia and policy analysts alike. In this backdrop, the paper undertakes to analyze how Kazakhstan grapples with the enduring predicaments in making it a vibrant democracy. The paper further attempts to dig deeper whether the slew of political and constitutional measures taken by the leadership of Kazakhstan were carefully crafted to ensure regime stability and economic expansion; or it was attempted to pave for smooth transition to democracy?

Keywords

Kazakhstan, Democratic Transition, Democratization, Human Rights, Leadership

Introduction

In spite of being an “essentially contested notion,” democracy still maintains a significant place in the contemporary political lexicon.¹ As a genre of political system, democracy had been favoured widely throughout the twentieth century and yet there is no close alternative of this systemic typology in the twenty-first century as well. When the last century was approaching towards the end, history witnessed a drastic change in the Eurasian landscape. With disintegration of the USSR, the Soviet system failed to endure, leading to the emergence of more than a dozen political entities. The new region, Central Asia, which came into being found no other substitute than democratic polity just for the reason that legacy of Soviet totalitarianism, was not agreeable anymore. That is why in the initial first decade, leaders of Central Asian states were keen and optimistic for a

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democratic system. Central Asian states, however, have encountered with many complex challenges vis-à-vis the process of democratization. During the period of 'transition' the Central Asian states have undergone drastic experimentation with democracy, often stretching beyond its universal norms. This has involved skeptics to entitle them “illiberal” to “cunning democracies”. Kazakhstan is not treated as an exception either.² Even at present, the question whether Kazakhstan has overcome the phase of systemic transition is under serious scrutiny. To many, in spite of its proclaimed democratic espousal, the transition still remains a matter of debate (Isaacs, 2010; Olcott, 2010; Laruelle, 2014; Omelicheva, 2015). Kazakhstan witnessed a regime change when President Nursultan Nazarbayev resigned from his office in March 2019, and in June 2019 a snap presidential poll was conducted in which Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was elected as President. Notwithstanding, Nazarbayev still holds powerful position as a head of the Security Council and keeps with him the status of national leader, and continues to maintain greater influence on the politics of the present day Kazakhstan from the back channels (Kholdorbekov, 2019; Mallinson, 2019: 10-22).

Given this context, the work delves into the imperatives of democracy in Kazakhstan. To this end, first of all, a general overview of the democratic transition in Kazakhstan is presented, followed by a host of perspectives blended with theoretical underpinnings. The contestation over the nature and state of democratization in a narrative and counter-narrative continuum is elaborately elucidated in the subsequent section. The work attempts to inquire in the next section the missing components of the democratization process over the period of three decades in Kazakhstan and tends to connect the links which debilitated the entire process to make it consistently questionable. Following this, the work further examines the recent transition of power and finally comes up with measures to overcome the challenges the process of democratization is facing.

The State of Democracy in Kazakhstan: Diverse Perspectives

After independence in 1991, the main objective before Kazakhstan was to set priorities for both nation and state building. Economic reforms to ensure growth and development, democratic reforms along with nation-building and independent security set up were declared as the prime objectives of a newly independent state. Kazakhstan defined democracy-building as the beginning of a new era in the process of government formation and adopted its first Constitution in 1993 which stated as: “Kazakhstan proclaims itself democratic, secular, legal and social state whose highest values are an individual, his life, rights, and freedoms” (Government of Kazakhstan, 2019). For Kazakhstan, however, the path of democracy has never been smooth and linear. Challenges to democracy have not yet been fully overcome but the transitional phase has met some progress towards maturity. The major factors which constrained the development of democratization are quite a few; they served as key impediments towards a successful transition to democracy. The first and foremost challenge was to cope up with the heterogeneous social matrix that impeded the process of nation-building supported by unanimous ideology (Omelicheva, 2016). Secondly, internal political dynamics bereft of democratic background infused negative developments discouraging transition to mature. These included the role of president, the attitude of political elites, civil society

and most importantly opposition party (Sordi, 2016). Thirdly, to create an independent foreign policy and self-sufficient security set-up to fill the power gap as well as ideological vacuum created by the disintegration of the Soviet Union also turned out as insurmountable challenges (Junisbai & Junisbai, 2009; Ipek, 2007).

On the given parameter of liberal democracy, the question whether the democratic transition in Kazakhstan is complete requires an inquiry. To many, the advancement of democracy is slow and inadequate. If Robert Putnam's famous maxim on "making democracy work" is paraphrased, it would be pertinent to state that Kazakhstan has softly observed the practices and lackadaisically introduced the elements which would have made democracy work. By universal yardstick, democracy in Kazakhstan is regarded more often "controlled and guided" and therefore subjected to scathing criticism as to why such political arrangements continue to be in operation for more than a quarter-century. However, views on democratic development are varied; scholars and the Kazakh establishment place time and again contrary arguments (Blank, 2005; Luong, 2009; Collins, 2006; McFaul, 2006). A set of scholars consider it a feebly democratized state as compared to the states of Eastern Europe and Southern Caucasus. Whereas the Kazakh establishment proclaims it a state, which remained committed to the corresponding democratic principles (Taukebayeva, 2014).

Many western scholars categorize Kazakhstan close to an authoritarian state. For example, Edward Schatz (2004; 2009) in his book, *Modern Clan Politics: The Power of "Blood" in Kazakhstan and Beyond*, has leveled it as "soft-authoritarian" state. Soft-authoritarianism relies more centrally on the means of persuasion than on the means of coercion, even though coercion remains a part of the ruling elite's arsenal (Edward Schatz (2004, 2009). But how the Kazakh state has succeeded in maintaining the authoritarian stability? Assel Tutumlu argued that Kazakhstan has widely taken into consideration redistributing social welfare benefits, restructuring of private pension fund into a single pension fund by introducing pension reforms, and sticking to firm decision making on dilemmatic issues like property rights, investment opportunities and financial credibility to satisfy not only the common people but also elites to keep them loyal to the regime, eventually leading to a degree of stability (Tutumlu, 2016).

There are certain qualifying parameters which polities are leveled as democracy. Democracies widely observe certain conditions: competitive elitism, political pluralism, multi-party system, rule of law, freedom of expression, observation of human rights, free and fair election, independent media, impartial judiciary, strong civil society, liberty, equality, socially and culturally inclusive policies etc. Evidence on the ground fails to evince that Kazakhstan is equipped with these parameters, retarding the pace of transition to democracy and stirring up the row whether democracy is *de jure* or *de facto*. To a section of analysts, Kazakhstan's democracy is on paper (constitutionally) and not in practice (Merritt, 2006). Delving-in deeper to continue interrogation over the state of democracy in Kazakhstan, it is, however, appropriate to spell out the framework of 'democracy'. Robert Dahl, for instance, in his book *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* first used the term polyarchy to refer the institution and political process of modern representative democracy. Polyarchial regimes, as Dahl argued, are distinguished by the combination of two general factors: First is high tolerance of opposition to check

the arbitrary inclinations of government which is guaranteed by a competitive party system, guaranteed and protected civil liberties, and by a vigorous and healthy civil society (Dahl, 1972). Second is an opportunity for participating in politics, which is guaranteed by free and fair competitive elections to ensure a reliable level of popular responsiveness (Dahl, 1972). Following Dahl, Samuel P. Huntington also emphasized the 'features of a democratic system and the process of democratization. His fascinating idea waves of democratization' has added new thrust to the ongoing debates in the post-Cold War era. Highlighting the importance of participation, Huntington in his book *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (1991) has analyzed the process of democratization. To him, democratization is a process by which a society could progress from authoritarianism to minimalist democracy to substantive democracy. The process has never been linear, smooth and free of hazards. The experiences of both old and new democracies show that sustainable pro-democratic changes cannot be initiated and implemented effectively unless first the right social and economic conditions are created. By focusing on the third wave of democratization, Huntington pointed out that the emergence of social, economic and external conditions favorable to democracy is *necessary*, but not *sufficient*, to build democracy. In other words, building political institutions for supporting the process of democratization is required along with the willingness of political leaders to take the risk of democracy to make it happen (Huntington, 1991: 164-174).

The process of democratic transition varies in different societies owing to certain conditions. On this issue, scholars have diverse observations. For instance, one of the first attempts to create a 'model of transition' to democracy was taken by D. Rustow, who drew emphasis significantly on national unity and national identity as necessary prerequisites and placed sequence of stages in the transition to democracy: the rational unity as underlying cause of democratization through the stages of struggle, compromise and additive to democracy (Rustow, 2013). Another significant model presented by G.O'Donnell, F. Schmitter and Laurence Whiteheads in their book *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives* (1986). In the foreword of the book, Abraham F. Lowenthal has shaded light beautifully how transition from authoritarian regimes takes place.

“Authoritarian rule are conditioned and shaped by historical circumstances, unique in each country but patterned in predictable ways, by the way in which a previous democratic regime broke down, by the nature and duration of the authoritarian period, by the means the authoritarian regime uses to obtain legitimacy and to handle threats to its grip on power, by the initiative and the timing of experimental moves toward *abertura*, by the degree of security and self-confidence of the regime's elites and by the confidence and competence of those pushing for opening the political process, by the presence or absence of financial resources, by the counseling of outsiders, and by the prevailing international *fashions* that provide legitimacy to certain forms of transition” (Lowenthal, 1986: X).

Which model of transition qualifies the condition of Kazakhstan is an object of inquiry. For instance, Vladimir Gel'ma held that most theories of transition to democracy explicitly or implicitly accepted one of two conceptual models. The first model entails Joseph Schumpeter's 'competitive elitism' in which he defined democracy as “the process by which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for

the people's vote” (Gel'man, 2003: 87-104). The second is the pluralist model of 'polyarchy' subscribed by Dahl, as Gel'ma argued further, which includes both “two vital dimensions of democracy, namely competitiveness and participation, and a set of major civic and political rights and freedoms that serves as a basic indicator of democracy”(Gel'man, 2003). Without a doubt it can be argued that regardless of a number of theories dealing with transition, it is difficult to apply anyone for the analysis of democratization in post-Soviet states in general and Kazakhstan in particular. Kazakhstan after independence has been subjected to the dilemma of priority: the market economy first or democracy? But preferring market economy over democracy, Kazakhstan opted the formula “economics first and politics second.” This required every step of Kazakhstan's political reform has to be closely tied to economic progress (UNSC Occasional Paper Series, 2014). This model has served Kazakhstan well and corresponded with the priorities of Kazakh citizens. Even president Nazarbayev in his own book, *The Kazakhstan Way* (2008), justified the measures of economic reforms that had been taken before political reform. Nazarbayev once in his presidential address referred it to as: Democracy in Kazakhstan is “not the start of its journey but rather its destination.” Inspired by economic progress of four Asian Tigers: Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea, Kazakhstan has adopted Singapore as a role model for “the Kazakhstan way” and recalls its former leader who turned Singapore from a small port to a wealthy global hub (Niyazbekov, 2016). Nazarbayev following this model, accorded precedence to economics over politics. Kazakhstan's two-digit GDP growth rate for years upholds this thesis. For obvious reasons, the fast-pace economic growth has paid considerably in uplifting the social condition of people by reducing poverty, improving access to primary education and promoting gender equality, which in turn has amplified the image of the President and made his economic policies popular (Anderson, Capannelli, Ginting, and Taniguchi, 2018). Jonathan Aitken (2009) in his book *Nazarbayev and the Making of Kazakhstan: From Communism to Capitalism* affirmed this argument and emphasized that with this arrangement Nazarbayev succeeded in fetching international recognition for being fairly efficient on reforms and on domestic front attained people's faith; and that too was at the expense of democratic reforms. Aitken argued, although Kazakhstan is in the transition phase or drifting towards the democratic system but “despite the democratic deficit people have accepted the soft authoritarian system which gives legitimacy to the Kazakh government”(Aitken, 2009). Starr, Engwall and Cornell (2016) report has also underlined as: The political reform process in Kazakhstan has followed the mantra of “economy first, then politics”. The government has preferred a gradualist model of reform, in which sound economic development has been touted as an essential precondition for democratic reforms.

The Process of Democratization: Narratives and Counter-narratives

Moreover, democratization in Kazakhstan is very specific, as Taukebayeva argues. It took place in the presence of a number of factors: international (disintegration of the bipolar system), nation forming (national identity), socio-economic (crisis of economy), social (lack of middle- class), cultural (“culture shock”), procedural (the interrelations of economics and politics) and individual psychological factor (mental

attitude of political leaders to make important political decisions) (Taukebayeva, 2014). Having taken into consideration the observation of Robert Dahl that no contemporary polity can proclaim itself a full democracy, it can be argued that no given model of democracy applies aptly in the case of Kazakhstan; rather its transition eventually has to pass-through the evolution amenable to its own priorities, needs, and socio-political dynamics.

However contested, it is argued that Kazakhstan has been missing starkly the universal norms of democratic practices. The components which are regarded as indispensable are in great deficiency: the press freedom is deeply narrowed; people do not have adequate religious freedom; there is a lack of freedom of association; there are rampant cases of human rights infringement; and there is a guided political culture critically eclipsing the institutional functioning. Kazakhstan during more than two decades of its political journey has evolved a peculiar systemic arrangement wherein non-transparent electoral practice orchestrated and managed people's choice-determination via popularly unacceptable opposition parties participation, regressive political culture, heavily controlled power transaction intending to fetch the predetermined political outcome and stringently muzzled media pose questions against the claim of Kazakhstan as a democracy (Omelicheva, 2015). A recent report by the Chatham House (Royal Institute of International affairs) corroborates the same argument with facts as:

“A wide range of political rights and freedoms are effectively non-existent [in Kazakhstan]. In addition to access to information, these include political plurality; media freedom; freedom of assembly; the freedom of civil society to operate without pressure, intimidation or official consent; and freedom of association for trade unions and political parties other than the ruling Nur Otan party and 'accepted' political organizations. At the same time, other freedoms are often unchallenged and modern luxuries widely available, at least in the cities of Almaty and Nur-Sultan”. (Nixey, 2019: 4)

Inquiring the Western Perspective

The western view constitutes a developed and sophisticated conceptualization of democratic processes and looks at Kazakhstan through the lens of political pluralism, free and fair elections, and civic engagements. The popular view holds that Kazakh democracy does not fulfill the universal standard and basic norms of liberal democracy. Olcott (2008) once argued that “Kazakhstan is not a fledgling democracy” stands a fair scrutiny here. About a decade back, expressing doubt over founding President Nazarbayev's unwillingness of power transfer, Olcott frowned on the entire development Kazakhstan had been passing through then. To describe that state of affair, Olcott assumed four hypotheses: First that Nazarbayev didn't make up his mind of leaving his position and power; secondly, he didn't believe that someone should leave office at the height of his powers, before his mission to transform or build a new state got completed; thirdly, he had believed that the Kazakh nation was a part of Asian civilization and he was a wise Asian ruler; and lastly, Nazarbayev came from the tradition of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which believed that leaders never handed over power voluntarily. Therefore, Kazakhstan's political future depended widely on the question that when would president Nazarbayev leave office? (Olcott, 2008)

However, these hypotheses have recently been put under test when Nazarbayev, resigned in an unannounced television address in March 2019. In accordance with the Constitution, the speaker of the upper house of parliament, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, became the country's interim president (Kholdorbeko, 2019). Moreover, Nazarbayev stepped down voluntarily. This took place only the second time after Boris Yeltsin (first to do so in 1999), when the President of the post-Soviet republic has left his post upon his wish. Tokayev's interim charge as president was followed by a snap presidential poll which he won attaining 70.76 per cent of the vote defeating his nearest rival Amirzhan Kosanov. Now Tokayev is holding supreme position; nevertheless, Nazarbayev's role in Kazakh polity has not reduced. Through Constitutional Amendment in 2018, the power of the President has been weakened with respect to the National Security Council, which is now headed by Nazarbayev for life. He has assumed the status of national leader or *Elbasy* and retained the chairmanship of the ruling party Nur Otan. Looked critically by Human Rights Watch as: “Everything about this so-called transition has been carefully orchestrated and highly controlled – an approach the Kazakh authorities have long employed to regulate and restrict its citizens' political and civil lives” (Stefanello, 2019). Nazarbayev's resignation did not come as a surprise, as Sebastian Schiek of the Berlin-based German Institute for International and Security Affairs claims: “There were rumors that it could happen”, however, noting that laws passed in recent years indicated that leadership change was imminent (Goncharenko, 2019). Secondly, Kazakhstan progressively grew as an authoritarian state and maintained personalized system of power, and even before resignation of Nazarbayev certain protection of ensuring his important powers such as the head of Security Council and the status of a national leader were guaranteed (Goncharenko, 2019).

Given the fact that Kazakhstan has attained the status of principal institutionalized mechanisms of democratic governance such as elections and civil liberties but even then the ability of elites to frame the political debate, thereby defining the political agenda and channeling political outcomes enable them to make effectively good use of the state's means of persuasion as their arsenal, making the state a “soft-authoritarian” one (Schatz, 2009). This authoritarian status quo, however, has been put under strain, as Barbara Junisbai and Azmat Junisbai argued, Democratic Choice Opposition movement, clan divisions, and elite cleavages in fact served as a significant source of pressure for democratic political reform (Junisbai & Junisbai, 2009).

Moreover, western institutional reports published internationally follow broadly two lines while describing the state of democracy in Kazakhstan. The first line focuses on leadership, specifically president Nazarbayev's failure in meeting a prerequisite condition for the transition. The second line of explanation stresses on the structural issues which is voiced from human rights organizations like Amnesty International and institutions such as Freedom House, Eurasianet, and also, to an extent, media and press organizations like International Press Institute (IPI) and Radio Free Europe (RFE). The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, which studies democracy in 165 countries on the basis of five decisive factors: *electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture*, allocate scores on a range of indicators within these categories. Accordingly, each country is then

categorized as one of four types of regime: “full democracies”, “flawed democracies”, “hybrid regimes”, and “authoritarian regimes”. In 2018 Kazakhstan secured 144th place with a score of 2.94 falling into the category of authoritarian regimes (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2018). However, with a slight improvement, the 2019 report put Kazakhstan on the 139th place. The report has clearly indicated that with overall score below 4 Kazakhstan falls in the authoritarian category (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019).

Table-1: Democracy Index: EIU's Report

Country	Rank	Overall Score	Electoral processes and pluralism	Functioning of Government	Political Participation	Political Cultures	Civil Liberties
Kazakhstan (2018)	144	2.94	0.50	2.14	4.44	4.38	3.24
Kazakhstan (2019)	139	2.94	0.50	2.14	4.44	4.38	3.24

Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit, “Democracy Index 2018: Me Too Political Participation, Protest and Democracy”, p. 17 & The Economist Intelligence Unit, “Democracy Index 2019: A Year of Democratic Setback and Popular Protest”, p. 13. Retrieved 20 July 2020, from <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>

Table-2: Kazakhstan: Democracy Score (Year-wise)

Country	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010
Kazakhstan	2.94	2.94	3.06	3.06	3.06	3.17	3.06	2.95	3.24	3.30

Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit, “Democracy Index 2019: A Year of Democratic Setback and Popular Protest”, p. 18, Retrieved 20 July 2020, from <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>

Studies of Freedom House, an independent watchdog organization working for “the expansion of freedom and democracy around the world”, present similar picture. The latest report (2020) of Freedom House portrays gloomy state of affair for democracy in Kazakhstan, rating its democratic progress very low. The report titled “Nations in Transit 2020: Dropping the Democratic Façade” categorized Kazakhstan as “consolidated authoritarian regime” allocating 1.29, 1.29 and 1.32 democracy score in 2018, 2019 and 2020 reports respectively on the scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the lowest and 7 the highest level of democratic progress. The reports evaluated democratic progress in Kazakhstan on the basis of eight parameters: electoral process, civil society, independent media, national democratic governance, local democratic governance, judicial framework, independence and the last is corruption. All the parameters have shown very abysmal performance as the score for them remained below 1.5 as shown below (Freedom

House, 2020, 24-25).

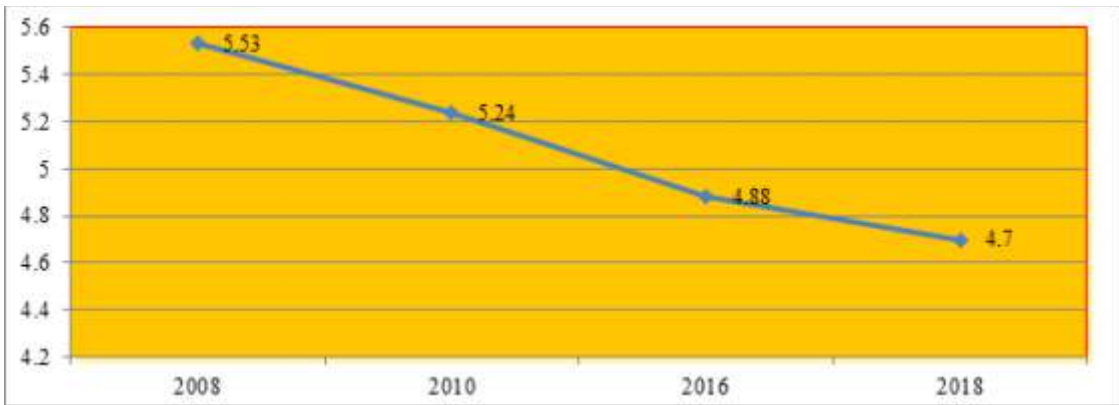
Table-3: Score for Eight Parameters on the Scale of 1 to 7

National Democratic Governance	1.25
Electoral Process	1.25
Civil Society	1.50
Independent Media	1.25
Local Democratic Governance	1.50
Judicial Framework and Independence	1.25
Corruption	1.25
Democracy Score	1.32
Democracy Percentage	5%

Source: Freedom House, “Nations in Transit 2020: Dropping the Democratic Façade”, Retrieved 20 July 2020, from https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/05062020_FHNIT2020_vfinal.pdf.p.24.

Another study, Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI), has ranked Kazakhstan in 2016, 85 out of 129 countries with score of 4.88 on the scale of 1-10 (Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index, 2016). Continuing on declining trend, in 2018 the country again registered 88th position out of 129 countries with the score of 4.70 (BTI, 2018). The BT Index assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of political management on the parameters of country's structural conditions, traditions of civil society, intensity of conflicts, level of education, economic performance and institutional capacity (BTI, 2018). The declining trend can be demonstrated through following graph.

Graph-1: Declining BT Index of Kazakhstan from 2008 Onwards



Computed from the various reports of BTI, Retrieved 20 July 2020, from https://atlas.bti-project.org/1*2020*CV:CTC:SELKAZ*CAT*KAZ*REG:TAB

Kazakhstan at the Crossroads: Wither the Democratic Transition

Evidently, as illustrated above, factors responsible for the stagnation in the democratic transition in Kazakhstan are numerous. Meritt has explicated a combination of factors responsible for this stagnation which include both internal and external (Meritt, 2006). At the time of independence, Kazakhstan has emerged as a unique phenomenon of the nations' ethnic and cultural interactions, which can be seen practically in all the aspects of human activity, language, way of life, traditions, confessions, way of thinking and mentality (Olcott, 2010). But after independence, it was clear that the major characteristics of Central Asian states are the presence of sub-national identities and titular nationalities. Despite demographic improvements in the position of titular nationalities, Central Asian states were facing critical challenge of creating a sense of commitment to the nationhood (Olcott, 2010). In the first few years of Kazakh independence, a state-building approach appears to have had decisive advantages over democratic reforms, ensuring that Kazakhstan actually remains Kazakhstan, which eventually led the government to abrogate the basic democratic rights—freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of political activity, and free elections (Bremmer & Welt, 1996: 179). Leaders of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan succeeded in cultivating certain modes of reasoning and evaluation among citizens that eased the acceptance of the regime as right and proper, thereby fetching in “effective authoritarian legitimation” (Omelicheva, 2016). According to Mehran Kamrava, ensuring the legitimacy of the authoritarian, multiethnic state was only one of the steps toward nation-building, albeit a highly significant one (Kamrava, 2019: 1). What followed, “as typified by Kazakhstan's experience”, as Kamrava emphasizes, “included the promotion of an inclusive, civic state through official discourse; the implementation of nationalizing policies through the promotion of a dominant language, culture, and historiography (and unofficial discrimination against non-titular groups); and the monopolization of the political field by titular elites” (Kamrava, 2019). This served persuasively as legitimizing logic for powerful presidential control by Nazarbayev.

Role of leadership, especially Nazarbayev's has been key factor in the process of democratization. In fact, the process of nation-building and democratization both are associated with the personality of Kazakh President. Shedding light on this issue, M.B. Olcott rightly observed: "...Nazarbayev thought that the processes of nation-building and state-building of a newly independent Kazakhstan were dependent upon him and to fulfill those objectives, he concentrated all the powers in one man" (Olcott, 2008).

The strong presidential rule was the most effective way to promote reform unencumbered by resistance from "backward looking" forces or special interest groups. Nazarbayev subscribed a archetypical model of democracy swerving away from western model and contending that liberal model of democracy wouldn't fit into Kazakhstan's specific political dynamics, and economic and social environment (Olcott, 2008). "Perhaps we have not yet created the democratic society. But we can be proud of the achievements we have. Our progress to a truly democratic system is irreversible. We have created fundamentals of democracy", adducing gains on the front of democratization, Nazarbayev stated once (Taukebayeva, 2014).

Undoubtedly, over the years, Nazarbayev maintained huge backing of people in the presidential elections and his political party has no close alternative in Kazakh political system. Taking advantage of people's support through electoral exercise he remained undeterred against any mass dissent, for instance which took place in 2011 in Zhanaozen owing to economic reasons, in 2016 against the new amendments to the Land Code in Atyra and Aktobe. Besides, after transfer of presidential power to Tokayev in 2019 in Nur-Sultan (new Capital renamed after Astana) and Almaty, a series of civil society protest took place on political and economic issues. Omelicheva's observation that given the public's apprehension of uncertainty associated with the transition to a post-Nazarbayev political system and the high levels of trust in the person of the president, there is a remote possibility of shunning Nazarbayev in Kazakh politics, proves to be true (Omelicheva, 2016: 12). Omelicheva citing a report of the World Value Survey reiterates that people accord priority to a strong leadership over democratic diffusion as the majority of respondents from Kazakhstan seemed not to be bothered by the deficit of democracy in the country: 64.4% believe that it is very good or fairly good to have a strong leader who does not have to bother with the parliament and elections (Omelicheva, 2016: 12). To add, for instance, in April 2015, Nazarbayev cemented his grip on power, winning reelection in a landslide 97.75 per cent of the vote in his favour.

However, in the period following independence, elections in Kazakhstan have increasingly become stage-managed events designed to shore up the power of Nazarbayev and his ruling Nur Otan party rather than to offer voters a choice about who rules them, and this election was no different (Freedom House, 2016). As a report writes that in spite of these realities, Nazarbayev's popularity had not come to recede till his departure from president; his "cult of personality was – and still is – manifest" (Bohr, et.al., 2019: 5). Most likely Nazarbayev would have won all the elections in which he stood, even had they been held democratically albeit with 70 per cent popular voting in place of 95 per cent and above, the report reiterates (Bohr, et.al., 2019: 5). The fact that in March 2019, Nazarbayev decided to step down from the presidency but continue holding sway as he has retained the status of national leader and maintained himself as the head of

country's Security Council. To detractors, this poll was well planned and choreographed by the former president Nazarbayev to bring a smooth and peaceful transition of power, however he has maintained his powerful position (Vaal and Gordeteyeva, 2019).

As a matter of fact the democratic values that are recognized in principle have not perceived the mass consciousness as a real tool to solve the problems of society. Nevertheless, over the years of the political transformation of Kazakhstan the degree of political participation of citizens through the institution of democratic elections has increased markedly (Taukebayeva, 2014). Lillis (2018) presents political trajectory of the country by analyzing that the major problem of democratic transition lie in the management of election system which are not only a travesty of democracy but lack one essential element and that is *political choice*. Lillis further argues that the lack of free and fair media, violence and intimidation during election, ruthless suppression of opposition, dissent and the total intolerance of peaceful protests are the regular events in Kazakhstan's day-to-day politics (Lillis, 2018).

Civil society plays important role in the process of democratization. In Kazakhstan, in the first decade of independence the process was quite fast and perceptible but in the later period it gradually slowed down. Under Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan retreated from any genuine commitment to developing a vibrant, grassroots-based civil society in favour of a model in which NGOs and other non-profits operate under not just government scrutiny but government control, treating civil society more as a vassal to further government policy than as an independent actor (Lillis, 2019a: 37-58). According to Freedom House Report 2018, score for civil society in Kazakhstan has been falling gradually. On the scale of 1 to 7 (highest to lowest), civil society score in 2010 was 5.75, which further declined to 6.50 in 2015 and 6.75 in 2018. The report states that abysmal civil society condition is caused “due to ongoing routine harassment and persecution of activists, journalists, lawyers, individual users of social networks, and religious communities against the backdrop of increasingly restrictive legislation and administrative pressure on civil society” (Freedom House, 2018).

Leadership, Political Processes and Constitutional Measures

Kazakh establishment, especially former president Nazarbayev, took an attempt to standardize a specific version of democracy what he believed was in practice and suffice in its own right fulfilling democratic values the Kazakh society aspired to have. Nazarbayev gave expression to his ideas publishing articles in different media outlets. To him, laying foundations of the market economy, civil society and democracy simultaneously was the first order of priority. But, this had not to come at the expense of stability and tranquility in society. Nazarbayev clarified:

“Democratic reform and measures to enhance human rights must not, however, be introduced in a way that undermines stability. We cannot afford to disturb the atmosphere of religious and inter-ethnic tolerance”... and ... Please remember also just how long your own societies took to complete the processes on which we are now embarked” (Official site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan).

Before assuming new role in Kazakh polity in 2019, Nazarbayev introduced multiple constitutional amendments after adoption of the first Constitution in 1993. Over the years,

he succeeded in consolidating “autocratic legacy”, at the expense of strengthening democratic institutions intending to embolden his position in power. Kate Mallinson enlists such attempt as:

“In 1995 Nazarbayev got his term extended till 1999 in a national referendum; in 1998 eliminated the age limit of 65; in May 2007, the presidential term was restored back to five years, with removal of the two-term limit for Nazarbayev; in parallel to these amendments, several other constitutional manoeuvres occurred, including introduction of the concept of the 'First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan' and 'Leader of the Nation' in new law in 2000, subsequently amended in 2010, thereby giving Nazarbayev certain powers for life, such as the right to address the people of Kazakhstan, parliament, government agencies and officials on matters of domestic and foreign policy and national security. Besides, legal and constitutional amendments in 2007, 2010 and 2017 respectively provided Nazarbayev with an unlimited number of terms in office, legal immunity, and immunity of his family's property” (Mallinson, 2019: 12).

However amidst these realities, Nazarbayev didn't disregard the voice raised against democratic process *in toto*, wrote Aitken (2009) while examining such developments. In particular, Nazarbayev has been responsive to pressure coming from the West, particularly, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Kazakhstan held the chair of the OSCE in 2010. Since then Kazakhstan has been taking extensive efforts towards religious freedom, human rights and fair election more than Russia, China and other states of the region. Sophia McClennen, a professor of International Affairs at Penn State University and political analyst who in person visited the polling booth during the presidential election of April 2015, didn't find much in sync with what often claimed to be as democratic discrepancy all-pervasive in the state (as Quoted in Michael, 2016).

It is observed, however, that during the last five years the Kazakh leadership appeared more down to business towards accommodating democratic measures. Nazarbayev time and again called for amending the Constitution to give more power and responsibilities to the parliament and the government for managing social and economic development. For instance, in 2015, he announced a 100-step reform program focusing on introducing greater transparency and increase institutional effectiveness. The major challenge is obviously in the implementation, in particular overcoming vested special interests intent on preserving the status quo. But if the reforms are implemented, they would undoubtedly improve in the quality of public administration and bridge any existing gaps between citizens and their government (Starr, Engvall & Cornell, 2016). In this programme of major democratic reforms, important functions are transferred to Parliament. These include the Parliament's role in the formation of Government, bringing amendments, choosing the cabinet, and lawmakers holding a “vote of no confidence” on a sitting cabinet. What it all means is that the Government would be accountable to the Mazhilis rather than to the President. The Government, headed by Prime Minister, will have the right to set programmes but also bear full accountability for them. However, the President will retain the right to cancel or suspend the acts of the Government (Stobdan, 2017). To implement these proposals, the President has given official approval to the constitutional reforms on March 10, 2017. In his own words, these were aimed at “serious

redistribution of power and democratization of the political system as a whole”. Another major development is that through this reform the presidential position is also reframed as that of a “supreme arbiter”, focusing on the “strategic functions” of foreign policy, national security, and defense (Pistan, 2017).

Exigency of Transition and Democratic Imperatives

On 19 March 2019 in a big political move, Nazabayev announced to renounce power leading to an eruption of huge speculation regarding this instantaneous regime change and the future of democratic reforms. In his television address, he enunciated: “I have taken a decision, which was not easy for me, to resign as president...I am staying with you...Caring for the country and its people will remain my concerns.” (Roth, 2019). Later, as quoted by *The Astana Times*, Nazarbayev affirmed: “I resigned on 19 March. But a new generation will come to lead the country. This is how it works in life and I believe they will work for the sake of the country and our generation should help them.” (Satubaldina, 2019). But the fact is that Nazarbayev still holds a powerful position in Kazakh politics as a head of the Security Council and as a leader of the nation. Joanna Lillies has observed that the “President has stepped aside rather than stepping down”. Nevertheless, Nazarbayev may retain power behind the scene. Putz (2019) wrote “Nazarbayev, now from behind a thin curtain of retirement, is still the shot-caller in Kazakhstan. Everything else is a flashy theater production designed to distract the Kazakh people, and the international community, from Kazakhstan's economic and social problems”,. Another emerging dynamics of Kazakh domestic politics is that due to this snap poll for the first time strong opposition has emerged. In the election, after Tokayev, his nearest rival, opposition candidate Amirzhan Kosanov, garnered a surprisingly respectable 16 per cent of total votes casted. His electoral performance indicates that he did the best till now and no opposition candidate has ever done this before in Kazakhstan's history (Leonard & Kumenov, 2019). Secondly, public protests during elections demonstrated the emergence of burgeoning civil society where so many new protest movements like the Wake Up Movement emerged which called for democratic reforms including civil liberties. Tokayev, however, after election pronounced publicly that “the electoral process was exemplary and democratic”, contrary to independent reports from the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), an international watchdog that the government invited to observe the elections. In its preliminary report, ODIHR said the election “was tarnished by clear violations of fundamental freedoms as well as pressure on critical voices” (Sorbello, 2019).

The most exigent task towards resting Kazakhstan on the track of democracy is to exploit the opportunity of the transition of Nazarbayev's regime. For that, Kazakhstan needs to adopt some drastic reforms by introducing both political and constitutional measures. First of all, Kazakhstan needs to adopt political pluralism keeping in mind the diverse character of ethnic composition of the Kazakh society. Kazakhstan needs to strengthen the authority of representative bodies of power. Expansion of Parliament, the introduction of proportional representation system in the lower house of Parliament and promoting local-self governments could be effective measures. Secondly, at the constitutional level, Kazakhstan must introduce some mechanism of checks and balances,

separation of powers, and decentralization by giving some authority to local governments at the grass-root level. For effectively accomplishing these changes Kazakhstan may have two options: first is a presidential form of government with federal features and second is a parliamentary system headed by the prime minister with nominal head of the state which is president. Thirdly, participatory political culture could be augmented to make civil society secured, mobilized, informative and vibrant. Rights and freedoms of citizens should be expanded. Fourthly, the emergence of a multi-party system is a basic prerequisite for democratic development in Kazakhstan. Being a multi-ethnic society multi-party system should represent the interests of all ethnic groups in Kazakhstan and it must be ensured that these ethnic groups should be represented in both local councils and in Parliament. Fifthly, the implementation of principles and values of democracy and human rights shall be an important measure to enforce democracy in the country. And finally, there is a need to infuse strong political will among political elites and especially those who hold the power including President of the republic to carry on political reforms and the process of democratization (Beary, 2012).

Conclusion

Kazakhstan's professed claim to set the nation on the path of true democracy is yet to meet reality. The checkered history of democratization has posed in itself the challenge of how to meet these claims. Narratives and counter-narratives vis-à-vis democratization process lay down a degree of truth that can't be easily disdained. The attempt of ruling political elite, particularly the President, in making Kazakh democratic venture distinctive and inimitable rationalized with the expediency of historical legacy, cultural exceptionalism, political feasibility and economic need, has been subjected to critical investigation. In the course of the pitched voice against western liberal democratic legitimacy, for sure no strong assertion could defy the logic that the western liberal democracy will not settle down in the region for it being inconsistent with the long historical legacy of the Central Asian countries. The conflict between the quest for its own model and ongoing practice—often termed as simulated with multiple levels such as controlled—can only be settled if real concerns of the people of Kazakhstan receive their genuine place *via* ideal type of democracy in Weberian terms drawing symmetry between the liberal democracy and Kazakhstan's indigenously induced experience. Albeit, through constitutional reforms which are a part of “third modernization” Kazakhstan has succeeded in ensuring “the stability of the political system”, “making the Government and Parliament more effective in responding to modern challenges”, and evolving a political system for Kazakhstan of its own, rather than “copying a foreign model”, to cater to the country's unique problems. Through intended “fourth reform”, dubbed as “open government”, as undertaken by Nazarbayev, may witness an infusion of maturity in the democratic reforms with the redistribution of powers aiming at ensuring appropriate system with checks and balances (Pistan, 2017). Yet, a full transition to democracy needs plenty of measures, which include settling down the transition of power from Nazarbayev 1.0 to Nazarbayev 2.0; setting the new government of Tokayev to hold governmental accountability within legal and constitutional frame with sheer transparency and inclusiveness; fostering civic culture; widening window for civil societies for enhancing

fertility in the otherwise parched democratic soil; beefing up the bar of the rule of law, civil and justice administration; and maintaining legitimacy of relations with Eurasian countries for both domestic and international sustenance.

Notes

1. W.B. Gallie's idea of "essentially contested concept" is frequently used to illustrate the notion of democracy. The essentially contested concepts "inevitably involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users." See: W.B. Gallie. (1956). *Essentially Contested Concepts*. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56, 167–198. The notion of democracy being contested is due to its historical evolution, which itself "reveals that no unequivocal definition is possible because of the significant paradoxes, aporias, and contradictions it contains", writes Oliver Hidalgo (*Conceptual history and politics: Is the concept of democracy essentially contested?* *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 4(2) (2008), 176-201).
2. Democracy in Central Asian republics is not all about what the West subscribes. A fascinating analysis has been presented by Mariya Y. Omelicheva in her book *Democracy in Central Asia: Competing perspectives and alternative strategies* (2015). To Omelicheva, Western policymakers and academics have developed a sophisticated understanding of what democracy is about and this understanding emphasizes political pluralism, elections, and civic engagement, among other things. Yet, these ideas are largely divorced from how democracy and democratization are understood in Central Asia. The centrality of strong leadership shouldered with the task of resolving larger challenges of the Central Asian societies including democracy get more dogged towards power maintenance often attracting variety of "level" for the regime typology. However, a special level "cunning democracy" for the kind of polity Kazakhstan pursues is cited in a brief report (*Kazakhstan: Cunning democracy*) of Norwegian Helsinki Committee in 2013.

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