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Kazakh Lawmakers Back Leader

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ALMATY, Kazakhstan — Kazakhstan's long-serving president inched closer to securing another decade of unchallenged rule Friday after parliament opened the way for a referendum to scrap upcoming presidential elections.

A joint session of the lower and upper houses of parliament voted unanimously to change the constitution to allow the referendum.

President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has ruled the country since independence from the Soviet Union, was to face re-election in 2012. But organizers of a petition drive to allow him at least 10 more years in power claim to have collected 5 million signatures, about half the electorate.

Nazarbayev has to approve the amendment. Presidential adviser Yermukhamet Yertysbayev said he was uncertain what Nazarbayev would do now. Yertysbayev conceded that allowing the referendum would likely set Kazakhstan on a collision course with its international commitments to improve democratic standards.

"But parliament was unable to take any other decision since they represent the people, and 5

million people have supported this idea of referendum," he said in an interview.

The one-party parliament late last year put forth a motion to allow Nazarbayev to extend his term, which is currently limited to seven years by the constitution. But Nazarbayev swiftly rejected the proposal, raising expectations that the initiative might be dashed. But the success of the petition campaign now appears to have made the referendum inevitable.

On the eve of the vote, the U.S. ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, a group that includes democracy promotion among its main goals, expressed grave concerns over the referendum plans.

"To cancel presidential elections once again in favor of a referendum would represent a step backwards from Kazakhstan's OSCE commitments to establishing democracy, holding periodic free and fair elections, and respecting the rule of law," Ambassador Ian Kelly told the OSCE permanent council in Vienna.

Kazakhstan has never held an election considered fair by the OSCE.

A satirical cartoon posted Friday on YouTube to the accompaniment of a song mocking the referendum proposal ends with an on-screen message reading: "Make the right choice! Be a sheep and vote yes."

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