

Kazakh Leader Plans to Stay in Power

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ASTANA, Kazakhstan — Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev outlined plans on Friday to preside over Kazakhstan for as long as his health will allow, with or without a referendum that would cancel elections for the next decade.

Nazarbayev, in his annual state-of-the-nation address, said a constitutional council would decide whether to hold the referendum to extend his rule until 2020, an initiative backed by parliament and more than half of Kazakhstan's voters.

But the 70-year-old leader also made clear that even if the referendum proposal — which has been criticized by the United States and the European Union — were to be rejected by the council, he would stand for election again in 2012.

"The main thing is that I have understood the signal from the people: Don't leave the post, continue working," Nazarbayev said to a standing ovation in parliament.

In more than two decades as president, Nazarbayev has presided over an inflow of foreign investment into Kazakhstan in excess of \$150 billion. The country is the world's largest uranium miner and a major exporter of oil and industrial metals.

After more than half of Kazakhstan's 9 million registered voters signed a petition calling for the referendum, parliament voted unanimously in favor of a plan that would preclude the holding of presidential elections scheduled for 2012 and 2017.

"Whatever decision we take with you after the verdict of the constitutional council, I promise that, if my health and stamina allow me and if there is such unanimous support from the people, I will work as long as I'm allowed," Nazarbayev said.

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