

Presidential Campaign Kicks Off in Kazakhstan

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ALMATY, Kazakhstan — When Kazakhstan's long-serving President Nursultan Nazarbayev bids for re-election next month, he will do it safe in the knowledge his country is unlikely to be roiled by the kind of unrest now spreading across the Middle East.

Buoyed on vast reserves of oil, natural gas and other valuable commodities eagerly sought after by the West and neighboring China, his former Soviet nation is blessed by relatively prosperity and is seemingly immune from broad popular discontent.

The presidential election campaign that officially started Thursday for the April 3 vote pits Nazarbayev against three little-known outsiders, but leading opposition politicians have boycotted the vote they have called a sham.

One political party, however, is vowing to run the liveliest campaign of all and is urging people stay away from polling stations altogether.

Since authorities strictly monitor public protests, the unregistered Alga, or Forward, party has

concentrated its efforts online and has been posting a flood of anti-election videos. Clips include footage of improvised street gatherings of people holding up signs reading "Don't Go the Elections," as well as cartoons and satirical montages decrying corruption and infringement of democratic freedoms.

Kazakhstan was not even supposed to have an election this year.

Nazarbayev's current seven-year term was due to end in 2012, but that plan was derailed by a petition campaign to hold a referendum on abolishing the next two scheduled elections and for the president to remain in office for another decade.

The one-party parliament also supported the referendum idea, but Nazarbayev's professed objections to the initiative precipitated an apparent impasse.

Other contenders in the election include Gani Kasymov, leader of the Party of Patriots, Communist People's Party chief Zhambyl Akhmetbekov and environmentalist Mels Yeleusizov, who says he is only running to raise awareness about green issues. Critics deride these candidates as nominal opposition put in place to make the election appear democratic.

The main opposition force, National Social Democratic Party-Azat, has declined to put forward a candidate and has complained of "continuing antidemocratic tendencies."

Nobody questions whether Nazarbayev is going to win, but many instead wonder just how crushing his victory is going to be.

Despite the misgivings of the largely sidelined opposition, Nazarbayev, who has ruled the energy-rich, predominantly Muslim nation since it gained independence in 1991, is genuinely held in high esteem by many Kazakhs who see him as a guarantor of stability and continuity.

Some suggest that the ongoing wave of popular unrest in the Middle East may have unsettled authorities, however, and prompted the snap election.

Nazarbayev's adviser Yertysbayev dismissed those complaints and said that the opposition is simply unable and unwilling to compete. "The main reason for their decision is that they lack organizational, ideological and financial preparedness," Yertysbayev said.

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