

U.S. Leaks Show Kazakh Plan to Squeeze Opposition

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PRAGUE — Kazakhstan's long-serving president won praise from the United States and pro-democracy advocates when in January he rejected a plan to secure another 10 years of uncontested rule and instead called a presidential election.

But according to unpublished U.S. diplomatic cables, Nursultan Nazarbayev's government planned to deny opposition parties a free election as recently as 2009 because it feared a vote could deal a blow to the ruling Nur Otan party.

The cables, obtained by WikiLeaks and reviewed by Reuters, underscore Nazarbayev's firm grip on power.

They also pose difficult questions for the United States, which is struggling to reconcile long-standing support for autocratic leaders who promise political stability with growing popular calls for more personal freedoms and democracy. It's a conundrum Washington faces across the Arab world from Morocco to Bahrain.

But as the cables show, it's also an issue in Central Asia, where the United States relies on a collection of autocratic countries for support in Afghanistan and to check Russia's influence in its former empire.

Quoting U.S. diplomats' conversations with a Kazakh presidential adviser and the Kazakh ambassador to Washington, the cables said Nazarbayev was eager to find a successor — a pressing question for investors who have funneled more than \$120 billion into the oil- and metals-exporting country during his rule.

But in a follow-up conversation, the adviser said there were no obvious candidates and it would take time for one to emerge from a young generation of Western-educated Kazakhs.

He added that Nazarbayev could stay in power until 2020.

In a move political analysts say was designed to avoid unwelcome comparison with authoritarian leaders in the Arab world, 70-year-old Nazarbayev called a presidential election for April 3.

But the cables detail recent thinking on how to thwart the opposition. In one from March 2009, presidential adviser Yermukhamet Yertysbayev says the administration was considering stifling the opposition in a parliamentary election proposed for — but never held — the same year.

"Yertysbayev [said] that the government would, in fact, restrict the opposition's activities as much as possible, including limiting the opposition's access to the broadcast media, denying opposition requests to hold rallies, and bribing opposition leaders to divide them," the cable said.

"Unfortunately, the government views the opposition as enemies, not as opponents," the cable quoted him as saying.

Kazakhstan's opposition is split, and Nazarbayev, a former member of the Soviet Politburo who has ruled since 1989, is expected to win Sunday's poll by a landslide.

The country has never held a vote judged free and fair by international observers. The ruling Nur Otan party holds every seat in parliament.

There is no evidence the authorities are trying to suppress the opposition in this election. But when contacted by Reuters, presidential adviser Yertysbayev conceded that the cables reflected his 2009 conversation with a U.S. official.

He said rallies would have been allowed in specific places if applied for in advance. Ahead of Sunday's vote, some opposition parties held an officially sanctioned rally in Almaty on March 13.

"Sure enough, many in the higher echelons of power were apprehensive about the unification of the opposition and the nomination of a single candidate," Yertysbayev told Reuters, explaining it could marginally decrease Nazarbayev's advantage.

"It wouldn't be 90-10 [percent, in favor of Nur Otan], but let's say 70-30. But this would have

given the opportunity for this 30 percent to enter parliament," he said.

He added that he would prefer a two-party system, but the opposition had not "advanced to a new qualitative level."

"The fact they are boycotting the elections shows that, as before, they want confrontation," he said of Sunday's presidential election. "That suits the existing authorities."

Regarding bribes paid to the opposition, he said: "I said that I have no such information, but I do not deny it. It's entirely possible.

"I know opposition members who vehemently denounce the authorities in the newspapers, but themselves ask for an audience with the prime minister, ask to organize meetings with department heads and bankers to serve their own economic interests."

Some analysts say opposition parties who declined to participate in the presidential vote were positioning themselves for the chance of gaining entry to parliament in 2012.

Nazarbayev's office did not respond to written queries for this article.

In the cables, U.S. diplomats describe Kazakhstan as an authoritarian "proto-democracy" but said it was not simply one of the "simplistic caricatures of Central Asia," an autocratic region where political dissent is not tolerated.

In a 2009 cable titled "Kazakhstan, Pivot of Central Asia," a senior diplomat from the region recommended Washington engage with the country to back U.S. goals in Afghanistan and warned of Russia's efforts to wield dominion over the region.

"While the former Red Army might not threaten the independent states of Central Asia, Kremlin ideologues and their lawyers have worked mightily to erect a neo-Soviet 'Silk Curtain' around Central Asia, with the goal of making the five Central Asian states Cold War-style satellites of Russia," the diplomat wrote.

The diplomat noted that U.S. energy companies Chevron, ExxonMobil and ConocoPhillips had invested more than \$8 billion in Kazakhstan's oil and gas sectors. The country would become a top 10 oil exporter by the middle of this decade, helping diminish Russia's supply monopoly in Eurasia.

"We are certainly not leaving Central Asia and certainly do not accept Russia's 'privileged sphere of influence' that would make the Central Asian states satellites of the Kremlin," the diplomat wrote.

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