

Kazakhstan Dissolves Parliament, Sets Vote

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BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan — Kazakhstan's president issued a decree Wednesday to dissolve parliament and call a snap election that will end the governing party's monopolistic grip over the legislature.

Under a new election law, a minimum of two parties will enter parliament after the Jan. 15 polls, although no robust anti-government forces are believed to stand any real prospect of winning seats.

President Nursultan Nazarbayev said at a government meeting Tuesday that the election should be brought forward — it was originally scheduled for August 2012 — to avoid the campaigning season coinciding with an anticipated global economic downturn.

The authoritarian, oil-rich nation's parliament is currently occupied exclusively by Nazarbayev's Nur Otan party.

Changes to the law approved in 2009 mean the party that wins the second-largest number

of votes will be allocated seats even if it fails to pass the 7 percent threshold normally needed to get into parliament.

Kazakhstan has undertaken concerted efforts to project itself as a dynamic emerging economy, but its one-party parliament has long been a source of embarrassment and the subject of international criticism. Despite the apparent efforts to broaden representation in parliament, few believe any genuine opposition parties will win seats.

The pro-business and government-friendly Ak Zhol party is seen as most likely to enter the legislature. Ak Zhol leader Azat Peruashev is known to be a close associate of Nazarbayev's influential billionaire son-in-law, Timur Kulibayev.

"What is particularly offensive is that the authorities are using government money to hold elections that are utterly senseless because there is no real competition," said pro-democracy activist Galym Ageulov.

The Central Asian nation, which shares long borders with both Russia and China, has never held an election deemed free and fair by international observers.

Nazarbayev, a 71-year old former Communist party boss who has led his country with an iron fist since independence in 1991, was earlier this year re-elected for a new five-year term with 95.6 percent of the vote. All real power lies in his hands and parliament serves in effect as a rubber-stamp body.

The initiative to dissolve parliament emerged last week, when 53 deputies in the 107-member lower house of parliament approved a motion to call on Nazarbayev to call an early vote. While the move was nominally conceived by the deputies, it is inconceivable that it was executed without the prior blessing of the presidential administration.

One major coalition of opposition groups that had been taking shape over the past few months was the People's Front, comprised of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan and the unregistered Alga party.

But a court in October banned the Communist Party for a six-month period over what it ruled was its illegal membership in the People's Front, thus putting it out of the running for the upcoming vote.

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