



## Party system formation in Kazakhstan: between formal and informal politics

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Overall, each monograph should be considered as a significant contribution to the study of the recent trends in NM&SN in Kazakhstan and in the region. It is hoped that they will stimulate other scholars to direct greater attention to this field, sparking new debates and new studies of this very dynamic and rapidly changing area.

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**Party system formation in Kazakhstan: between formal and informal politics**, edited by Rico Isaacs, London and New York, Routledge, 2011, xv + 218 pp., £95.00, ISBN 978-0-415-59023-5.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was much anticipation in Kazakhstan about the prospects for a coming multi-party system. However, the emergence of the first political parties did not lead to democratic changes. Indeed, when numerous political parties took a back seat in the consolidated authoritarian regime, many experts argued that it was necessary to modify the republic's election laws to promote the development of political parties. When 10% of parliamentary seats were assigned to parties in 1999, experts suggested that this was not enough and that it should be raised to at least 50%. Constitutional amendments in 2007 mandated proportional elections to the lower house of the parliament, but this led neither to the development of parties nor to democracy. The authoritarian regime has used parties and other democratic institutions to its own benefit. As a result, today Kazakhstan has in fact only one pro-presidential party of power (Nur Otan), a number of illusionary loyal parties, and a few marginalized opposition parties on the verge of disappearance.

What is the explanation for this situation? Some authorities blame patron–client and clan ties; some, the traditional nomadic Kazakh society; others, the Soviet past. However, these explanations overlook the problem of how informal patron–client relations are interwoven with the formal procedural practices of parties. In this book, Rico Isaacs proposes a solution to this problem on the basis of neopatrimonialism.

According to Isaacs, neopatrimonialism is characterized by three features: patriarchal norms of personal rule and loyalty to the ruler; patronage and patron–client relations; and factional inter-elite networks. The formal aspects of this type of regime include rational bureaucratic structures and formal 'constitutional-liberal' institutions. Analysing the formal aspects of the parties' development in the neopatrimonial post-Soviet society, Isaacs considers such formal institutional constraints as institutional choice, electoral design, and constitutional laws pertaining to political parties. Party typology is built on party organization, ideology, and behavioural norms. The relationship between parties and the broader society is characterized by disconnect and passiveness, personalistic and clientelistic linkages, homogeneity of opinion, and emerging cleavages (20). The book fleshes out these typologies and structures in detail.

In the first two chapters, Isaacs demonstrates the utility of neopatrimonialism theory for the study of party system formation in Kazakhstan. The third chapter is devoted to the formation of neopatrimonialism in Kazakhstan. The author analyses pre-Soviet and Soviet forms of patrimonialism in Central Asia and then turns toward post-Soviet neopatrimonialism in Kazakhstan. The use of neopatrimonial informal politics in modern Kazakhstan means a further synthesis between traditional informal politics, legacies of the communist system, and new post-Soviet institutions. Isaacs argues that in order to consolidate his authoritarian regime and negate threats to it, Kazakhstan's president, Nursultan Nazarbaev, turns to informal political practices to counter the political instability that results from inter-party and electoral competition and pluralism.

If the first three chapters of the book are preoccupied mainly with the theory of neopatrimonialism, the following three deal with Kazakhstan's parties. Here the interconnections between informal political relations and the formal development of parties are examined. The fourth chapter shows how Nazarbaev's formal and informal domination gives him the opportunity to set up institutional constraints on the parties in three ways. Firstly, he has formed a party system characterized by the domination of Nur Otan (the pro-presidential party), the creation of virtual and satellite parties, and the co-option and marginalization of opposition parties. Secondly, he has instituted electoral rules that benefit the pro-presidential parties and candidates. Thirdly, the law on political parties is favourable to Nur Otan and other parties loyal to the president; it disadvantages opposition parties. Thus, Nur Otan plays a central role in Kazakhstan's party system, strengthening elite stability and consolidating and securing the authoritarian rule of Nazarbaev.

From the analysis of the party system in the fourth chapter, Isaacs moves to the typological characteristics of Kazakhstan's political parties from the point of view of their membership, organization, ideology, and behavioural norms. The author shows how informal politics determines party type on the basis of the central role of loyalty, patronage, and personality. At the same time, the fact that parties emerge on the basis of elite factions shows that parties as formal institutions can influence informal politics thanks to their important role in structuring factional elite competition. Therefore, Kazakhstan's parties, both pro-presidential and oppositional, are elite-based in their nature and structure. A party serves the interests of some charismatic person or narrow leading group; the most important party decisions are made by the top party circle. Due its personal nature, the party's activities are determined not so much by ideology as by interests of its leader.

In the sixth chapter, the links of parties with society more broadly are characterized by Isaacs as disconnection and passivity of the citizenry toward politics. Under the domination of informal politics, the relationships between citizens and parties are built on personalistic and clientelistic relations. Disconnect and passivity exist in the context of state discourse on the critical role of the Nazarbaev leadership for the prosperity and stability of the country and his position as the main representative of the citizens' interests. This discourse is worked out and maintained, according to Isaacs, by Nur Otan. In the final (seventh) chapter, the author conducts a comparative analysis of Kazakhstan with other post-Soviet states. This analysis is based on the premise that their political systems bear common neopatrimonial features, and their political parties are interwoven into them. Therefore, conclusions about the operation of political parties and party systems in Kazakhstan are relevant to other countries in the post-Soviet space. These include the consolidation of the one-party system with the domination of the presidential party in Kazakhstan, Russia, Azerbaijan, and other post-Soviet states; the role of parties in the strengthening of authoritarian regimes; and the functioning of parties in contexts marked by personalism and clientelism.

The book is not without shortcomings. Unfortunately, there are numerous errors in the transliteration of Kazakh and Russian names and words into English. More substantially, Isaacs states the critical role of Nur Otan in the working out and maintaining of the discourse on the central role

of Nazarbaev in the success and prosperity of the economy and the national security of Kazakhstan. Undoubtedly, the role of Nur Otan in this is large; but the role of the state media is not less important, because they began inculcating this discourse into the public mind in the 1990s and 2000s, much earlier than Nur Otan. More attention could be given to this.

In a formal sense, there is a multi-party system in Kazakhstan; but in reality, as Isaacs correctly shows, there is only one party: Nur Otan. The number of parties in a party system is an important characteristic. In this sense it would have been interesting if Isaacs had conducted a comparative analysis of the modern post-Soviet one-party system with one-party systems in different historical periods and different parts of the world. There is no such an analysis in the book, but hopefully its author will conduct it in the future.

In general, this book can be evaluated as an important contribution to the study of post-Soviet societies and their party systems. The neopatrimonial approach provides a deeper understanding of post-Soviet social and political systems, allowing us to grasp how authoritarianism is consolidated in them and the role of parties in this consolidation. The book is the first systematic theoretical investigation of political parties in modern Kazakhstan. It gives a comprehensive idea of the particularities of the party system in Kazakhstan, its evolution, and the social and political conditions under which the system functions. The statements and conclusions of the book have proven accurate in the political practice of Kazakhstan during the two years since its publication in 2011.

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**Afghan rumour bazaar: secret sub-cultures, hidden worlds and the everyday life of the absurd**, written by Nushin Arbabzadah, London, Hurst and Co., 2013, 238 pp., £15.95 p/b, ISBN 978-1-849-04231-4.

During my trips to Afghanistan I encountered Afghans from all walks of life, from Taliban prisoners of war to farmers to former *mujahideen*, and got to know a little bit about what it was like to be an Afghan. But I was always an outsider and felt that I was just scratching the surface of this extraordinary people that seemed to be trapped somewhere between the Middle Ages and the twenty-first century. It was difficult for me as a Westerner to penetrate this people's world.

It was for this reason that I found Nushin Arbabzadah's collection of 80 easily digested journeys into the psyche of her countrymen to be so invaluable and ground-breaking. For the first time, an Afghan, and a woman at that, takes Westerners into the world(s) of her countrymen and gives them an insider's guide to these people who are all too often cast in simplistic, one-dimensional terms by outsiders who see them as merely a backdrop for NATO operations.

As an Afghan who fled her country during the anti-Soviet  *jihad*  and grew up in the West, Arbabzadah is uniquely qualified to analyse her society. In 2008 she returned to her native country a changed woman, empowered by her experience of living abroad. She is thus a hybrid of East and West and is capable of honestly critiquing the strengths and weaknesses of her former homeland in ways that outsiders, and Afghans who never lived abroad, cannot.