

A vote for stability and continuity at a time of formidable challenges

Last month's presidential election in Kazakhstan was not a contest of democracy versus autocracy. It was an overwhelming vote for stability and continuity at a time when the country faces formidable challenges.

Western electorates are not used to seeing a leader re-elected for a fifth term with a 97 percent majority. But the skepticism from international journalists from abroad should be tempered by the domestic reality at home. An Ipsos MORI poll just before the vote showed that President Nursultan Nazarbayev had an approval rating of over 90 percent.

As *The Economist* rather grudgingly reported in the week before the election: "Mr. Nazarbayev is genuinely popular and despite Kazakhstan's problems he has overseen an economy that is a model of prosperity compared with the basket cases elsewhere in Central Asia."

The economic weather may be worsening. The slump in oil prices has hit Kazakhstan hard. So has the fallout from the crisis in Ukraine and the sanctions-related collapse in the value of the Russian ruble. Even so, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development is forecasting a 1.5 percent growth rate for Kazakhstan in 2015, down from 5.1 percent. Such growth should be welcomed given the economic challenges facing the region, especially Russia.

"When Russia sneezes, Kazakhstan catches a bad cold," goes a local saying. President Nazarbayev has been a clever cultivator of good relations with his giant northern neighbor, which shares a 4,250-mile (6,840 kilometer) frontier with Kazakhstan, longer than the U.S. border with Canada.

The country's economic ties with Russia are strong. This neighborly economic cooperation, as well as President Nazarbayev's multivector foreign policy, shows why a crisis of the sort witnessed in Ukraine could never happen in Kazakhstan.

On the other side of Kazakhstan lies another giant: China. The two countries had no agreed borders and had endured a long history of mutual antagonism when Nazarbayev became president of independent Kazakhstan in 1991. Today, all is sweetness and light between the two countries. Trade and investment are booming.

All border issues are settled. On May 7, President Xi Jinping made a successful visit to Astana and, in early September, President Nazarbayev plans to reciprocate with a state visit to Beijing. The two heads of state enjoy a close personal friendship. Soon they will sign an agreement creating a synergy between Kazakhstan's Nuryl Zhol economic policy and China's program of developing the Silk Road economic belt. The agreement, through Chinese assistance, will create huge infrastructure projects across Northern and Western Kazakhstan. It also demonstrates the strength of the ties between Beijing and Astana, which was always President Nazarbayev's goal.

On the third foreign-policy vector, Kazakhstan's relations with Europe and the United States are in good shape. President Barack Obama and other Western leaders have warmly congratulated Nazarbayev on his re-election. Given the strategic geographical position of Kazakhstan and its role as a bridge between East and West, U.S. and European leaders understand that the stability President Nazarbayev brings

is strongly in the interest of the global community.

According to his critics, President Nazarbayev is less than sure-footed in four areas. He has a succession problem, lack-of-progress-toward democracy problem, a human-rights problem and an international-image problem. These issues deserve more careful analysis than they usually receive from the Western media.

On the succession, it is inconceivable that a president who has built the foundations of his country so skillfully does not have a well-thought-out plan for what will come after him. He just isn't telling the world about it yet.

Assuming he stays in good health, my prediction is that President Nazarbayev's fifth term will not be his last. He will still be in his 70s when his current term expires in 2020. Political longevity goes down well in Asia. The late Lee Kuan Yew, who led Singapore for over 30 years, is one of President Nazarbayev's role models.

When I met the Kazakh president recently, I tried to pay him a compliment by quoting the words of Sophocles: "Sometimes one has to wait until the evening to see how glorious the day has been." To which he replied: "What makes you think I have reached the evening?" Clearly he is not thinking of retirement just after winning re-election.

Landslide victories bother foreign commentators but delight Kazakhs. The different mind-sets need explanation. In old democracies, elections are a bore to be

complained and grumbled about. The mechanics of electoral change are unsettling and often painful, even when they are necessary.

In a young country, like Kazakhstan, voting is a joy. I have been in Kazakhstan for the last two elections, and both times the atmosphere resembled one big party, with bands at polling stations, dancing in the streets and record turnouts. There was no pretense about people's enthusiasm. The international election observers who monitored the elections did not detect any intimidation of voters or electoral fraud. The OSCE observers found that election preparations were efficiently administered and that voting proceeded in an orderly manner. There were, however, some criticisms regarding a lack of genuine opposition and free speech. These are valid points by the standards of Washington

or London, which have been honing the processes of democracy for centuries, but peccadilloes for a fledgling nation holding only its fifth presidential election.

There are two main reasons President Nazarbayev remains popular. The first is that he has given his country political stability. The second is that on his watch he has delivered high employment, better health care, rising educational standards and a sound economy. His track record suggests that if there are troubles ahead, he will once again prove to be the pilot who weathered the storm. First presidents of newly created nations tend to be exceptionally well trusted, or at least given the benefit of the doubt.

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