FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2017

Kazakhstan

NOT FREE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>22 /100</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Rights</td>
<td>5/40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Civil Liberties</td>
<td>17/60</td>
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</tbody>
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Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.
Ratings Change

Kazakhstan’s political rights rating declined from 6 to 7 due to voters’ lack of access to any genuine political choice and the continuation of efforts by the government to stifle opportunities for opposition groups.

Overview

Kazakhstan has been ruled by President Nursultan Nazarbayev, the former first secretary of its branch of the Soviet-era Communist Party, since independence in 1991. While there are regular parliamentary and presidential elections, none to date have been considered free or fair by reputable international observers, and all major parties exhibit political loyalty to the president. The authorities have consistently marginalized or imprisoned genuine opposition figures. The media are either in state hands or owned by government-friendly businessmen. Freedoms of speech and assembly remain restricted, criticism of Nazarbayev is not permitted, and corruption is endemic.

Key Developments in 2016

- In March, early elections were held for the lower house of Parliament. Nazarbayev’s Nur Otan party secured an overwhelming majority of seats in a process that did not meet international democratic standards.
- In April and May, thousands of people across Kazakhstan protested against a proposed reform of the land code that would allow long-term leases for foreigners. While there was no major violence against demonstrators, the authorities sought to curb the protests by blocking roads and detaining activists and organizers.
- Opposition leader Vladimir Kozlov was released early from prison in August, having been sentenced to seven and a half years in 2012 for his alleged involvement in inciting social unrest in Zhanaozen in 2011.
Executive Summary

In March 2016, President Nazarbayev’s Nur Otan party won a lopsided victory in early parliamentary elections, capturing 84 of the lower house’s 98 directly elected seats—one more than in 2012. Two other parties that are generally loyal to the president, Ak Zhol and the Communist People’s Party, each secured 7 seats. The elections took place against a backdrop of low prices for the country’s oil and gas exports, which have slowed economic growth and forced devaluations of the national currency.

Protests took place in several cities across the country in April and May in response to proposed reforms of the land code that would allow foreign entities to lease agricultural land for up to 25 years, rather than the current maximum of 10 years. The authorities generally did not use direct violence to suppress the demonstrations, but hundreds of organizers and participants were arrested, in many cases preemptively, and some 50 journalists were also detained as they attempted to report on the events. While most were quickly released, two leading activists were eventually sentenced to five years in prison in November on charges including incitement of social discord, and others faced lesser penalties. Police also physically blocked access to planned protest areas, used social media monitoring to identify and intimidate organizers, and apparently disrupted access to some social media applications at crucial times. In light of the opposition to the proposed reform, Nazarbayev postponed the plan by five years and set up a commission to review the matter.

In June, a group of up to 26 suspected Islamist militants attacked weapons shops and security installations in the city of Aktobe. At least 25 people were killed, including 18 attackers. A gunman later struck a police station in Almaty in July, killing eight police officers and two civilians. The government has sought to prevent Islamist violence in part by exerting tight control over religious groups and materials that it deems “extremist” or “nontraditional,” though such restrictions extend to nonviolent Muslim and Christian groups as well.

Nazarbayev undertook a major government shuffle in September. Long-serving prime minister Karim Masimov was transferred to lead the National Security Committee (KNB) and replaced in the premiership by Deputy Prime Minister Bakytzhan
Sagintayev. Nazarbayev’s daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva, was removed from her position as deputy prime minister and appointed to a seat in the Senate.

Also during the year, the authorities continued to arrest and prosecute journalists and social media users on a range of criminal charges. In one high-profile example, Seytkazy Matayev, the head of the Kazakh Union of Journalists and chair of the National Press Club, and his son Aset Matayev, director of the independent news agency KazTag, were detained in February on fraud and embezzlement charges. Observers speculated on possible political or corrupt motivations behind the prosecution; both defendants had complained of recent government harassment and said the case was an effort to suppress their work. Matayev and his son were found guilty in October and sentenced to six and five years in prison, respectively.

The government remained sensitive to the perceived threat of Russian nationalism. In January, authorities arrested Shymkent-based businessman Tokhtar Tuleshov, who was known for his close Russian ties. He was sentenced in November to 21 years in prison for alleged extremism, possession of illegal weapons, and plotting to overthrow the government. He also faced a separate trial on charges that he had financed that year’s land code protests.

**Political Rights**

**A. Electoral Process**

**B. Political Pluralism and Participation**

**C. Functioning of Government**

**Civil Liberties**
D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

F. Rule of Law

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

This country report has been abridged for Freedom in the World 2017. For background information on political rights and civil liberties in Kazakhstan, see Freedom in the World 2016.

On Kazakhstan
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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score
23/100 Not Free
Internet Freedom Score

32/100  Not Free

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