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Civil society, political stability, and state power in Central Asia: cooperation and contestation

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This article develops a concept of civil society in Central Asia distinct from that which emerged from the East European communist societies of the late 1980s. Kazakhstan presents a case study of a civil society that conceptually can be located between the vibrant civil society of the Baltic democracies and the civil society of the strongly repressive environments of Belarus or Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan's authoritarian structures and cultural traditions make it difficult to develop strong independent civic organizations – cooperation tends to mark state-civil society relations more than contestation, which shaped much of Eastern Europe's experience. Even in a context of relative affluence where civil society organizations are allowed some space to engage in critical activities, contestation tends to be minimized. This is only partially related to state suppression and cooptation; a political culture that views democratic processes as potentially destabilizing is also a significant factor. Kazakhstan represents a distinct Central Asian model of civil society, comparable to Russia but qualitatively different from that found in either Eastern or Western Europe, where civil society is less willing to confront the state, more cooperative with the authoritarian system, and wary of the potential for civic activism to degenerate into instability. Differentiating types of civil society is important because a key component of Western democracy assistance programmes has been providing assistance to build and strengthen civil societies. By refining our understanding of distinct civil society patterns in Central Asia, we can enhance our knowledge of political processes in this critical region, and we may improve the effectiveness of democracy assistance programmes. The study is grounded in field research, interviews, civil society workshops, survey research, and government documents.

Keywords: civil society; political culture; Kazakhstan; state–society relations; Central Asia; political participation

Introduction

This article develops the concept of civil society in the context of political developments in Central Asia.[1] The central argument here is that the idea of civil society

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developed by East European intellectuals in the 1980s to oppose the repressive communist state emerged in a cultural context substantially different from that of Central Asia, even though both regions were in effect colonial appendages on Moscow and shared similar institutional legacies. While all civil societies comprise elements of support for and criticism of state authorities and their policies, the precise mix of cooperative and contestative elements in a political culture may vary dramatically. In the Central Asian context, cooperation tends to mark state–civil society relations more than contestation, which characterized state–civil society relations in Eastern Europe. Even in a context of relative affluence where civil society organizations have space to engage in critical activities, contestation may be minimal. This is only partially related to state suppression and cooptation; a political culture that views democratic processes as potentially destabilizing is also a factor.

Differentiating types of civil society is important because a key component of Western democracy assistance programmes has been providing assistance to build and strengthen civil societies, albeit to minimal effect in Central Asia.[2] By refining our understanding of distinct civil society patterns in Central Asia, we can enhance our knowledge of political processes in this critical region, and we may improve the effectiveness of democracy assistance programmes. To explicate Central Asian civil society, this article examines one key state – Kazakhstan – in comparative perspective. Kazakhstan is by far the most affluent and politically stable of the five post-communist Central Asian states, and theoretically should have the greatest potential to develop a civil society on the Western, contestative model. Kazakhstan may not be perfectly representative of the post-Soviet republics, but it does contain a number of elements common to post-Soviet systems and so may be located in the middle of the 15 in terms of state–society relations.[3] The Kazakh state dominates civil society less thoroughly than does the state in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan or Belarus; yet civil society is far weaker than in the Baltic states or Ukraine, for instance. Kazakhstan's civil society–state dynamic represents a model that is qualitatively different from that in Eastern or Western Europe; it is, though, in many respects comparable to the type of civil society found in Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and the Caucasus.

Each of the former Soviet republics has been confronted with the task of building state structures capable of providing effective governance and ensuring stability. While these societies possessed clearly delineated (if disputed) spatial boundaries, they varied significantly in the strength of their national identity, and all were forced to create or recreate sovereign communities. Each also had to balance the demands of a nascent civil society with the need to maintain order. This article poses the following research question: How has Kazakhstan, as a post-communist state, addressed the tension between the need to build state power and national identity, and efforts to accommodate an incipient civil society? By focusing on Kazakhstan as a revealing case, we can improve our understanding of the larger population of post-communist political systems.[4]

Based on field research, including interviews, civil society workshops, survey research, and government documents, this article first makes the case for a differentiated concept of civil society in the Central Asian context, and then reviews the region's experience under Soviet colonial rule. Subsequent sections discuss economic development and civic participation, cultural factors in civil society, the role of clan and religion, and conceptions of loyal opposition and citizenship in Kazakhstan. In the conclusion I argue that a broader concept of civil society assessing both cooperative and confrontational elements is more suited to post-Soviet states than the conflict-oriented liberal democratic model.

Civil society and Central Asia

Civil society is often treated as an independent variable in the literature. Political scientists who focus on political culture – Robert Putnam, Larry Diamond, and Ronald Inglehart, for example – argue that a vibrant civil society is fundamental to the development and maintenance of democracy.[5] Others have posited á la Weber that a causal link between certain cultures and economic development exists.[6] Some question a positive role for associational life, noting that non-governmental organizations may promote anti-democratic ideals and behaviours.[7] Still others deny civil society a significant role either in economic growth or democratization. Omar Encarnación, for example, claims that civil society may play only a marginal role in democratic consolidation; he identifies institution-building as being far more effective.[8] The former Soviet republics followed widely varying transitional paths, with relatively autonomous organizational life impacting politics in some systems, while playing a marginal role in others.

Post-communist systems with aspirations toward democracy have faced a complex, even contradictory task of developing strong, effective states, while simultaneously building viable, independent civil societies that can impose constraints on the exercise of that state power. Achieving the right balance is seldom easy. Political elites, particularly those who started their careers in a political milieu that tolerated no opposition, have difficulty accepting criticism and oversight from social groups.[9] Perhaps more significantly, post-communist publics are as wary of political activities not regulated by the state, as they are of excessive state control over society.[10] Spontaneous participation – protests and demonstrations, for example – has the potential to degenerate into large-scale disorder, creating uncertainties and threatening hard-won gains. A critical attitude toward potentially disruptive forms of civic action can be expected in societies that have progressed beyond subsistence levels, but have yet to achieve conditions of stable affluence, because instability can jeopardize newly acquired gains.[11]

The concept of civil society is fairly amorphous, eluding a concise definition. The liberal approach to civil society focuses on the centrality of voluntary associations in society and the networks among citizens. In the relationship between society and state, liberalism tends to stress the autonomy of the former.[12] Civil society is held to be autonomous from, and often in conflict with the state. Utilizing

this narrower approach, some scholars have argued that civil society is essentially a Western construct, with little applicability to more traditional societies.[13] Others have argued, persuasively in this author's opinion, that civil society cannot be autonomous from the state. The state establishes the framework within which civil society functions, it imposes limits on civil society, and it provides support in the form of resources, protection, and personnel. This line of reasoning asserts that civil society needs the state, and that the relationship between the two can be described as collaborative and cooperative, not simply confrontational. Thus it makes little sense to delineate strictly autonomous political and civil spheres.[14]

If we accept that civil society is not a dichotomous but rather an ordinal variable, with cases spanning a continuum from strong to weak, the concept can strengthen our understanding of comparative state–society relations, without being unduly stretched analytically.[15] I argue that in post-communist contexts the concept of civil society is fundamental to the evolving relationship between state and public, while acknowledging the wide gap between the two and the relatively insulated nature of the state. Civil society matters because it is vital for deepening or consolidating democracy; simply grafting on democratic institutions often results in imperfect or incomplete democracies, be they illiberal, delegative, or qualified by other adjectives.[16]

The late twentieth century understanding of the concept of civil society emerged out of opposition in Eastern Europe, as an attempt to shield society from the totalizing power of the communist state.[17] Civil society was strongest in those countries where the party–state systems had proved unable to completely dominate social space – Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Further eastward, in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and Russia, the atomization of society was closer to absolute. When these systems finally liberalized, civic action tended to be more mass-oriented and sporadic, with civic groups rapidly forming and dissolving.[18] A type of civil society was evolving in Central Asia during the first years after independence, but it was one far weaker and more constrained by state authority than its counterparts in the West.[19]

Of all the former Soviet republics, the Central Asian states faced independence with both the weakest state structures and national identities. Faced with the potential for ethnic fragmentation and religious extremism, their priorities were to ensure stability and political order, develop a viable national identity, and create legitimacy. A strong, activist state was deemed vital to achieve these goals.[20] In light of these circumstances, applying a broader, more communal definition of civil society seems appropriate for Central Asia, encompassing trade unions, universities, the press, professional organizations and churches, along with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), quasi or even government organized and supported organizations (QUANGOs and GONGOs), and social movements.[21] Civil society, then, is framed by the state, and certainly may be strongly influenced by the state, but is not totally dominated by it.[22]

As the civil society concept has been applied across cultural contexts, scholars such as White and Chandhoke accept that government organized or supported

civil organizations are vital components of civil society. Soviet communist rule involved near-total state control of all social groups, and as such, transitional post-communist countries cannot be expected to develop mature civil societies from scratch in one or two decades. While a broader definition of the concept of civil society arguably erodes the critical protective and monitoring functions of civic associations, and state-supported or state-encouraged civil society may seem an oxymoron, even established democracies frame the context within which civil society operates, enabling some organizations while inhibiting others.[23]

Since the essence of communist totalitarianism was thorough party–state control over social organizing, analysis of civil society in post-communist settings must specify the relationship between new social and political groups, and the state. Neither the Tocqueville/Putnam[24] concept of associational life, fostering civic responsibility in a democratic polity, nor the Kuron/Michnik[25] idea of civil society as providing a protected sphere which resists the tyrannical (communist) state, adequately captures post-Soviet politics.[26] This paper suggests a third variant of civil society may be more appropriate for post-communist Central Asian systems, where the state exercises partial control over associational life, managing or co-opting some groups, and attempting to marginalize others. In this context, there is a duality of attitudes on both the state and the civil society sides. Civil society groups can be seen to be both vigorously supportive and highly critical of the state. In turn, the state finds utility in many group activities, and may be involved directly or indirectly, but given its tenuous hold on power and lack of democratic legitimacy, both fears and seeks to manage associational life.

Kazakhstan provides an instructive case study of this 'in-between' form of civil society, which may yield insights applicable to a number of other post-communist states, most notably Russia. In Kazakhstan the concept of the proper role of civil society is in flux, located as it is between the centralizing, absolutist state model of the communist era, and the yet-to-be-achieved pluralist conception of a stable, mature democracy. The state in Kazakhstan is not democratic, nor is it as repressive as the regimes in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. It is most accurately described as a hegemonic electoral authoritarian regime, where elections are a façade, parliamentary opposition is marginalized and has no chance of winning, and the dominant party controls most or all of the seats in the legislature. The executive wins elections by unrealistically large vote totals, and then claims an unassailable mandate.[27] This type of regime permits some space for civil society, but at the same time seeks to channel social energies into actions supportive of the government and ruling party.

In terms of social order, Kazakhstan has generally managed to avoid the turbulence experienced by other post-communist states, including Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Tajikistan, Georgia and Uzbekistan. The country's relative success is even more impressive considering the presence of significant ethnic cleavages, which could have precipitated domestic conflict as in Yugoslavia. Kazakhstan, it would seem, has devised a formula (albeit an authoritarian one) for balancing the oppositional and supportive elements of civil society with the need for a strong state to maintain

order in a time of flux. Elaborating on the origins of supportive and oppositional elements of civil societies in this type of political system can help us better understand state–society relations in Eurasia and elsewhere.

The legacy of Soviet rule and civil society

At the time of the breakup of the Soviet Union, the five Central Asian states started independence with a number of historical, cultural and economic similarities. None had existed as an independent modern state. Each consisted of largely Muslim Turkic peoples (with the exception of Persian Tajiks), educated under the compulsory Soviet system, with high levels of literacy and roughly comparable levels of economic development (as the poorest regions of the former Soviet Union). Each had significant numbers of ethnic Russians in the political and economic structures as a result of Soviet colonial administration.[28]

The Central Asian republics lagged behind the rest of the Soviet Union during perestroika in terms of developing civil society – the Baltic republics, Ukraine, Russia and the Caucasus had all developed broader networks of national, environmental, civil rights and political organizations by the time they achieved independence.[29] Kazakhstan witnessed widespread protests against ethnic Russians stemming from the appointment of Gennadi Kolbin (an ethnic Russian) as Communist Party First Secretary in December 1986, early in Gorbachev's term. However, this spontaneous activism did not translate into widespread group activity over the following years. There were exceptions, however, including the Nevada-Semipalatinsk anti-nuclear movement, Uighur nationalist organizations, and the Alash autonomy movement.[30]

Kazakhstan enjoyed several advantages that distinguished it from its Central Asian neighbours in the late Soviet period. First, Kazakhstan had a far higher proportion of Europeans, whose presence raised the overall levels of education and economic development, at least in the urban areas. Secondly, Moscow did not impose on Kazakhstan a cotton monoculture, as it did for example in Uzbekistan. Dependence on cotton made Uzbekistan's economy vulnerable, and it tended to marginalize women and children who sacrificed their education to work in the fields. As a result, Kazakhstan's economy was more diversified and more industrialized, and its population better educated. In the late perestroika era, while all of Central Asia was suffering from mass poverty, Kazakhstan's rate was less than half that of its neighbours. According to 1990 Soviet statistics 67.8% of Tajikistan's population subsisted on less than 100 rubles a month. In Uzbekistan, the figure was 57.1%, Turkmenistan 49.2%, and Kyrgyzstan 46.6%. By contrast, only 24.4% of Kazakhstan's population lived on less than 100 rubles.[31] Inglehart's revised modernization theory would suggest that Kazakhstan's higher level of socioeconomic development would create conditions more favourable to the emergence of a viable civil society.[32]

All the Central Asian states experienced severe economic crises following independence, with high inflation rates and real GDP declining between 40 and

70%. Tajikistan suffered severely as a result of the five-year civil war (1992–1997). Uzbekistan delayed implementing political or economic reforms, and so experienced the least short-term fluctuation. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan all experienced economic declines between 40 and 50%, bottoming out around 1997 and then gradually recovering.[33]

As Table 1 demonstrates, by about 2006 Kazakhstan had far outdistanced its neighbours on virtually all the major indicators. Its overall GDP, fueled by oil exports, was more than double Uzbekistan's; in per capita terms, Kazakhstan's

Table 1. Major indicators for Central Asian states.

	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
Population (millions)	15.3	5.2	6.7	4.9	26.5
GNI per capita	5,060	590	460	650	730
GDP (billions of US dollars) what currency?	103.8	3.5	3.7	12.9	22.3
Life expectancy	66	68	67	63	67
Rank on the Failed State Index*	101	39	38	46	26
Human Development Index ranking**	71	122	124	108	119
GINI coefficient	0.34	0.30	0.33	0.41	0.37
Percent below the poverty line	21%	70%	74%	44%	47%
Civil Society Ratings+	5.50	4.50	5.50	7.00	7.00
Independent Media Ratings+	6.75	6.00	6.00	7.00	7.00
NGO Sustainability Score++	4.0	4.1	4.8	5.6	5.7

Sources: Data for population, GNI per capita (Atlas method), GDP, and life expectancy are for 2006–2007, from the World Bank website, http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/0,,menuPK:476823~pagePK:64165236~piPK:64165141~theSitePK:469372,00.html (accessed February 2008).

Notes: *The Failed States Index Scores for 2008 are from the Fund for Peace website, http://www.fundforpeace.org/web/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=99&Itemid=140. A higher score indicates a more viable state.**The Human Development Index Rankings are from the United Nations Development Programme website, http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/. These are the rankings out of 179 countries assessed by the UNDP for 2008. The GINI coefficients (measure of inequality) are also from UNDP Human Development Reports 2007–2008, http://hdrstats.undp.org/indicators/147.html. Data on percent below the poverty lines are from Cukrowski, 'Central Asia: Spatial Disparities in Poverty'. +Civil Society Ratings (for 2008) and Independent Media Ratings (for 2008) are from Freedom House. Civil society ratings are based on a score of 1 to 7, with lower scores indicating the highest levels of democratic progress. A lower score on the Independent Media Ratings indicates greater media freedom. Finland has the best rating with a score of 9; North Korea the worst with a score of 97. Accessed at http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=431&year=2008; http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=432&year=2008. ++The NGO Sustainability Score (for 2007) is developed by US AID, and countries are ranked according to Freedom House scales, from 1.0 (best) to 7.0 (worst). Rankings are based on legal environment, organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, service provision, infrastructure, and public image. Accessed at http://www.usaid.gov/locations/europe_eurasia/dem_gov/ngoindex/2007/ngosi_scores.pdf (accessed July 2009).

GDP was four times that of Uzbekistan. Statistically, Turkmenistan's per capita GDP appears close to Kazakhstan's, but the figure is distorted by the country's revenue from natural gas exports. The dominance of the hydrocarbon sector in Turkmenistan's economy, wasteful spending to maintain former President Saparmurat Niyazov's pervasive personality cult, the lack of private enterprise, and repressive political controls over organizing indicate weak prospects for civil society development in that country. Kazakhstan also far outpaced its neighbours in terms of foreign direct investment, amassing more than five times as much investment as the other four Central Asian states combined, although much of that investment has been in the oil and gas sector.

Politically, all five Central Asian states have maintained a strong executive authority, with weak, compliant legislatures.[34] Republic Communist Party first secretaries initially assumed the position of President in three of the newly independent states (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan); the Supreme Soviets of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan elected Askar Akayev and Kakhar Makhamov President of their respective republics in 1990.[35] While Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan held the promise of a possible transition toward more democratic politics in the 1990s, none of the Central Asian countries could be considered as sustaining a democratic transition, much less consolidating democracy. Kazakhstan, however, is distinctive in terms of its moderate authoritarianism, relative high levels of tolerance, broad scope for political participation and opposition, and political stability, all factors conducive to the formation of civil society. As is clear from Table 1, Kazakhstan has a far lower percentage of the population below the poverty line, it does dramatically better on the Fund for Peace's Failed States Index than other Central Asian countries, and it performs significantly better than its neighbours on the UN Development Programme's Human Development Index. Kazakhstan's development has come without dramatic increases in inequality – the GINI measure of income inequality, at .34, is in the moderate category, and considerably more egalitarian than the United States (at .41) or Russia (.40).

Central Asia's political culture and national identity were greatly shaped by the Soviet experience. While pre-revolutionary Russian rule did not significantly alter Central Asian traditions, Soviet rule did transform indigenous culture. Soviet nationalities policy established artificial political units that had fictive self-governance, while centralized rule was secured through the Communist Party, with final authority in Moscow. Central Asians had to identify as one of a number of titular nationalities, with that identity formalized on their internal passport. These policies weakened a broader Central Asian identity, but strengthened attachments to the titular republic and intensified ethnic identities.[36]

Soviet social and economic policies also had a major impact on the region. The brutal process of collectivization, the attendant famine of 1932–33, and the purges of the same decade fundamentally transformed the nomadic traditions of the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. Under Stalin tens of thousands of Koreans, Germans, Ukrainians, Chechens, Tatars, and Russians were deported to Kazakhstan. Many of these were intellectuals, iconoclasts and talented individuals who augmented

the republic's human capital. Anti-religious campaigns weakened Islam, particularly among nomadic peoples who were less religious to begin with. Anti-religious propaganda may have been less effective among sedentary Central Asians such as Uzbeks, but strict controls isolated the region from more radical variants of Islam in the Middle East.

Soviet education brought literacy and opportunity to Central Asians, though education had both positive and negative effects. The centralized Soviet model generally neglected Central Asian history, languages, and local cultural figures. Russian was the lingua franca in urban areas, and some young Central Asians, particularly the privileged offspring of the Party *nomenklatura*, could attend university in Moscow or Leningrad. As Kazakhs tended to be more highly educated, and more urbanized, they thus tended to be more assimilated to Soviet-Russian culture than other Central Asians.[37] Soviet education also impacted on gender relations, giving women nearly equal political and economic opportunities within what had been very male-dominated societies. Finally, all Central Asian republics experienced an influx of ethnic Russians, but Kazakhstan was unique in the extent to which its titular nationality was diluted by Russian immigrants. According to the 1959 census only 30% of the republic's population was ethnic Kazakh; 42.7% was ethnic Russian.

Soviet policies in Central Asia were clearly transformative, occasionally in unexpected directions, at times reinforcing instead of eradicating traditional features. For example, there is evidence that rather than destroying or weakening clan linkages in Kazakhstan, deliberate Soviet policies and the broader socio-economic modernization processes reinforced the importance of clan ties, while forcing clan loyalties below the surface. Informal kin-based networks were useful because they were ideally positioned to deal with the shortages of the centrally planned Soviet economy; as such, Soviet rule, in a classic example of unintended consequences, encouraged the persistence of clan networks.[38] In post-Soviet Kazakhstan clan identities continued to affect politics, though less obviously than in other parts of Central Asia. In sum, Soviet rule promoted social and economic modernization in Central Asia, and implanted ideas of equality and participation, though in carefully structured modes subject to strict monitoring. Concepts such as civil society against the state, as developed in Eastern Europe, or the notion of a loyal opposition, were foreign to the Soviet experience.

Economic development and civil society

On many measures, Kazakhstan has accumulated an impressive record of economic development compared to other Central Asian countries, particularly since the late 1990s. This relative success appears due to a combination of factors: starting from a more favourable base in the late Soviet period; more thorough and effective economic reforms, including privatization and monetary stabilization; high levels of foreign investment; and oil and gas wealth.[39] As Table 1 indicates, on most economic major indicators, Kazakhstan has far outperformed its

Central Asian peers. Inglehart's modernization hypothesis predicts that economic development will produce more complex social structures, including civil society groups, and thereby will generate demands for broader participation in governance (assuming development is not of the petro-state variety).[40] Kazakhstan's experience provides a test of the modernization hypothesis, with the caveat that hydrocarbon wealth may have distorted socioeconomic development.

The evidence suggests that Kazakhstan's recent prosperity has contributed to the formation of an emerging middle class. While the size of this new middle class is difficult to determine, it is clear that a large number of urban Kazakhstanis are buying homes and cars, securing higher education for their children, and even vacationing abroad. In contrast to the original modernization hypothesis, however, the great majority of the new middle class in Kazakhstan seems more preoccupied with maintaining stability and preserving its newly affluent lifestyle, than with challenging the authoritarian political system. Indeed, President Nursultan Nazarbayev has frequently asserted that his goal in developing Kazakhstan's middle class was to promote social stability and avoid a colour revolution.[41]

More sophisticated variants of the modernization hypothesis, such as that developed by Ronald Inglehart, suggest that prosperity and security are conducive to the development of cultural values favouring pluralism and democracy.[42] Inglehart and his collaborators argue that wealthier, postmaterialist societies generate cultural values that favour participation, are tolerant of diversity, and tend to be more critical of various forms of authority. If the postmaterialism thesis has merit, we should expect Kazakhstan to exhibit higher levels of participation and tolerance, and more critical attitudes toward authority than their neighbours. On objective measures of civil society Kazakhstan does considerably better than Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan, but worse than Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: in 2006 Freedom House assessed Kazakhstan higher on its measures of civil society than either governance or media freedom, but still accorded it a rather poor score of 5.75.[43] The World Values Survey does not include Kazakhstan in any of the four waves of surveys, but the post-communist Muslim countries that have been surveyed (Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan) score high on secular-rational values (but are more traditional than non-Muslim post-communist countries), and low on self expression (while scoring high on survival values).[44] People in these societies may have rather progressive political attitudes, but very few are active members of voluntary organizations.

Data collected by Strathclyde's Centre for the Study of Public Policy in 2002 confirm low levels of civic participation in Kazakhstan. Surveys conducted by the Centre ($N = 2000$) found 84% of Kazakhstanis claiming they were not members of any social organization or political party; only 5.6% of the respondents said they were active in at least one organization. Of 11 specific types of organizations mentioned in the survey (including NGOs, religious, sports, arts, women's, youth, charitable or professional organizations), in most cases well under 1% of the respondents acknowledged membership. Trade unions were the most popular, with 10.2% indicating membership; religious organizations were

second with 1.6% citing membership. The low levels of participation appear to be more the result of apathy than fear of the consequences of joining – when asked whether they agreed with the statement 'I can join any organization I like', 69.7% answered 'agree' or 'quite agree'.[45]

Available evidence suggests that most Kazakhstanis think of political participation in terms of system supporting rather than system challenging activities. A survey conducted in the Western Kazakhstan Oblast polled respondents on perceptions about political participation. When asked to evaluate the most effective forms of political participation in the Kazakh context, 46% said that voting through the electoral system was the most effective form of participation. An additional 30% said that participating in the activities of political parties was most effective, 12% mentioned taking part in the work of the organs of power, and 11% said unconventional participation. The bulk of respondents favouring unconventional forms of participation identified mass demonstrations, meetings, marches, strikes, and picketing as preferred courses of action; only 2% of those surveyed advocated armed resistance.[46]

The Strathclyde data also support the finding that unconventional participation such as engaging in strikes and demonstrations is a more common form of political activity than organized political action through groups. Of those surveyed, 3.4% said they had participated in strikes, and another 7.4% said they had not participated but would do so in the future. When asked about taking part in demonstrations and meetings, 9.2% said they had engaged in such activity, while another 7.6% said they would in the future. Strikes generally result from unsafe or exploitative working conditions, rather than over issues of pay or benefits, and often occur at foreign-owned firms. The government restricts workers' right to organize, enforces legal limitations on the right to strike, and favours state-controlled unions over private ones. Protests are generally small localized affairs, subject to government intimidation and harassment unless the participants observe strict regulations.[47]

When asked about their preferred type of participation, 56% answered voting, with 20% citing political party activities. The majority – 52% – agreed that elections in Kazakhstan were carried out in strict accordance with the law and basic democratic principles; 28% said that while elections were basically legal and democratic, there were often violations.[48] Educated and urban Kazakhstanis may understand that the electoral process falls short of Western democratic standards, but in general they approve of state-sanctioned forms of participation. Strikes and protests are commonly viewed as effective, but participation in NGOs seems to be viewed more as a specific goal-oriented activity than as a critical form of political participation.

According to a survey by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, a larger proportion of Kazakhstan's population is active in civic organizations than its Central Asian neighbours, but the country falls well behind other transitional societies like Russia and Mongolia. According to the same survey, Kazakhstanis demonstrate stronger support for democracy (about 50%) than

authoritarianism (20%). This response compares favourably with Russia (less than 40% and more than 30%, respectively), but compares poorly with democratic Mongolia (where fully 70% support democracy) or even Uzbekistan, where almost 70% indicate support for democracy.[49]

Business organizations generally accompany capitalist development, but in Kazakhstan economic development has not resulted in the formation of a network of business organizations that collaborate to advance their interests. Kazakhstan's for-profit sector may on occasion organize, as when Erzhan Dosmukhamedov of the Atameken National Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers attempted to establish a political party based on the business community. But overt political movements frequently encounter bureaucratic resistance.[50] The government refused to register Dosmukhamedov's party, and he was eventually forced into exile in Britain.[51] Business lobbying in Kazakhstan is more effectively carried out through kinship and personal connections and appeals to the upper levels of power. The country's business leaders, as in Russia, are inextricably linked with the political elite, rather than existing in a separate sphere. In addition, few businesses provide support to non-governmental organizations, an important source of NGO income in the US and elsewhere.[52] Kazakhstan's economic development has far surpassed that of its Central Asian neighbours, but progress in civil society has not kept pace with the country's economic growth.

State and civil society

As previously argued, post-Soviet political systems vary widely in the extent to which civil society has evolved, and in the degree to which political democracy has been consolidated, from the robust pluralist democracies of the Baltic states, to the repressive dictatorships of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Belarus. While the reasons behind such variation are multi-dimensional, certainly culture must play a role. The dynamic between state and civil society in Central Asia, as in all systems, reflects the internal balance of power. This section explores the interaction of Kazakhstan's authoritarian state and its civil society.

Knowledge and information are vital elements of an effective civil society, and are closely linked to education and mass media. Kazakhstan's considerable human capital has been nurtured by the state in the form of significant investments in higher education. Since 1993 the Bolashak ('The Future') programme has sent hundreds of students to Western democracies to study business, engineering, and the social sciences, mostly at the post-baccalaureate level.[53] This programme, which has become highly competitive, places graduates in top-level positions in the Kazakh government. Students presumably return with an appreciation of democratic, pluralist values, and they will eventually comprise a significant proportion of the nation's political elite. Many other Kazakh students are paying their own way in European or North American universities. In addition, Kazakhstan's state and private universities have invited faculty from Western democracies to teach and engage with their students, and to develop the research potential of leading universities.[54]

Freedom House has categorized Kazakhstan as 'not free' in its most recent analysis of press freedom, although on this measure only Kyrgyzstan does better of the Central Asian states. Mass media in Kazakhstan face constraints on objective reporting, and much of the media is either government owned, government controlled, or in the hands of the President's family and supporters. Editors and reporters generally exercise self-censorship, are frequently subjected to political pressure (particularly at the regional level), and may face criminal charges if they insult the dignity or honour of the President and his family. Increasingly, privately owned newspaper and television stations eschew political news in favour of safer entertainment coverage; in addition, many receive government subsidies, eroding their independence. Some opposition newspapers experience harassment.[55] Kazakhstan's Ministry of Information has adopted a heavy-handed approach to the media, seeking to restrain critical outlets. The internet is becoming more significant as a tool of the political opposition, particularly among urban residents, though the government filters websites and in July 2009 adopted legislation classifying all internet websites, chat rooms and blogs as 'media outlets', making internet users subject to the same restrictions imposed on other mass media.[56]

Civil society in the media sphere is active, but relatively ineffective in influencing official policies. The major NGOs working to defend freedom of the press include Adil Soz (International Fund for the Defense of Free Speech), Journalists in Danger (a partner organization to Reporters without Borders), and the Union of Journalists (a professional organization rather than a journalists' union). These organizations publicize attacks on journalists, lobby authorities for greater media freedom, promote constitutional and civil rights, and work to improve the professionalism of journalists.[57] Kazakhstan's media NGOs win few battles against the government, but they spark political discussion and hold the regime's repressive actions up to public and international scrutiny. For example, journalists, NGOs, opposition parties, and the OSCE all lobbied energetically against the 2009 internet legislation, and Adil Soz mounted an online campaign using blogs, Facebook and Twitter. Nazarbayev ultimately signed the law, but did so amid a firestorm of criticism over Kazakhstan's impending chairmanship of the OSCE.[58]

Kazakhstan's decade-long shift toward a president-dominated, soft authoritarian state has constrained the evolution of a more democratic political culture. Kazakhstan approached a genuinely pluralist polity with a working legislature and unfettered media in the mid-1990s, only to abandon this course later in the decade as President Nazarbayev exploited the powers of the presidency, marginalized the parliament, and brought much of the mass media under the control of his family. Nazarbayev, motivated by a deep-seated fear of centrifugal forces occasioned by the example of Russia under Boris Yeltsin, and the colour revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, consistently sought to curb grass-roots social forces and limit local autonomy.[59]

Nazarbayev's super-presidency has emasculated the legislature, politicized the courts, and consolidated the country's major political factions into a single-party hegemonic system. The Otan (Fatherland) party, created in 1999 as the central

pro-presidential party, has been enormously successful in Kazakhstan's political life. In the 2004 legislative elections Otan secured two-thirds of the seats in the Majilis (lower house of parliament). At the July 2006 Otan Party Congress the President's daughter Dariga Nazarbayeva agreed to merge her smaller Asar ('All Together') party with Otan, which then elected her father President of the enlarged party. Late in 2006 Otan had merged with two other pro-presidential parties, Civic Party and the Agrarian Party, which gave the new Nur-Otan (Shining Fatherland) party 90% of seats in the lower house. In the August 2007 national elections Nur-Otan took 88% of the vote and all 98 electoral seats in a newly expanded Majilis (an additional nine deputies were appointed by the President from the non-elective Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan).[60] Constitutional changes enacted earlier in 2007 had raised the electoral threshold to 7%, making it more difficult for an already weak opposition to gain representation. Other constitutional amendments guaranteed Nazarbayev the right to rule indefinitely as President.

NGOs in Kazakhstan are stronger than those found in other Central Asian countries, although they remain relatively weak and ineffective compared to those in Western democracies, and have only marginal impact on the dominant party or the state. Organizations and individuals who criticize Nazarbayev's family or senior officials have been subject in the past to libel suits; with the adoption of a 'privacy law' in late 2009 the government now has even greater scope for punishing criticism of authorities.[61] Few truly independent organizations have regular access to the country's decision-makers; a privileged position is reserved for NGOs connected to or led by elites with kin or friendship ties to government officials, or those linked to Nur-Otan.[62] Many government officials at the national and regional levels display a Soviet-style mindset contemptuous of public opinion.

Notwithstanding the consolidation of political control by the president and Nur-Otan, politicians, business people, and representatives of NGOs have advocated developing a more democratic political culture. Kazakhstan has a large number of non-governmental organizations that are active in the areas of human rights, women's issues, business, ecology, and youth issues. Approximately 5000 NGOs are officially registered in the country; of these about 800 are active, while the rest exist only on paper. Active NGOs tend to be concentrated in the major cities – Almaty, Astana, and Karaganda – with few active in the smaller towns and villages. Kazakhstani analysts admit their civil society is still not mature, and few groups have any real impact on public policy.[63]

While specialized NGOs may lobby for their causes, genuine political opposition is weak and uncoordinated. Political parties in Kazakhstan tend to be personalistic, but they have no charismatic leaders, and have not presented constructive alternatives to government policies. Intellectuals who lead potential opposition movements tend not to connect with rural populations in the *aul* (village) or provincial towns. Those individuals living outside Almaty, Astana and other large cities have retained a stronger 'Soviet mentality', and tend to support uncritically the President and his party. While Nur-Otan received 88.5% of the vote overall in the August 2007 elections, the opposition National Social Democratic

Parties took 10.6% of the votes in Astana and 21.5% in Almaty, reinforcing the perception that opposition is stronger among the more educated, urban residents. Turnout was also far lower in the two major cities than in the regions, suggesting disaffection with the electoral process.[64]

Nur-Otan members conveyed to this author their dismay at the lopsided victory of their party in the 2007 elections, which undermined the government's attempt to portray the elections as free and fair.[65] At best, Nur-Otan's control of the Majilis could be compared to the monopoly position of India's Congress Party, Japan's LDP, or possibly Singapore's People's Action Party. For many Kazakhs, however, the outcome recalls the Soviet Communist Party's political monopoly and staged elections. Interviews conducted over the period from 2006 to 2008, and the outcome of a series of workshops on building civil society conducted during 2007–2008, suggest that there is deep unease among Kazakh intellectuals over the growing power of the state and the absence of a viable opposition. Chief among their worries is the inability to construct legitimate political institutions to handle the inevitable question of executive succession.[66]

The scandal that erupted in summer 2007, dubbed 'Rakhatgate' by Kazakhs, underlined the fragility of the country's political institutions. Rakhat Aliev, Nazarbayev's son-in-law, was indicted on kidnapping charges in the disappearance of two prominent bankers. Aliev, who had been posted as the country's ambassador to Austria, requested asylum upon his indictment and in 2009 published an exposé of Nazarbayev and Kazakhstan's politics aptly entitled *The Godfather-in-Law*. President Nazarbayev's daughter Dariga, who had been his heir apparent, quickly divorced her husband, but it was apparently too late to salvage her political career. In any event, the prospect of a family dynasty did not bode well for a smooth, legitimate transition, even before the scandal broke. Otan leaders interpreted the 2006 merger of Dariga Nazarbayeva's Asar party with Otan as an attempt by the President to rein in his increasingly powerful daughter.

Elite infighting, pervasive corruption, and the president's arbitrary exercise of power have not generated widespread discontent. Most Kazakhstanis acknowledge their country is easily the best place to live in Central Asia, as indicated by the large influx of Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Tajiks and Chinese, who work in the booming construction and energy industries, engage in trade, and fill the bazaars. Nazarbayev brought a measure of political stability and economic prosperity to Kazakhstan unparalleled in the region. As in China, the rapid growth of wealth has led to a new middle class. While the growth of a middle class tends to be associated with the development of civil society organizations, in Kazakhstan the newly affluent appear to be more interested in making money than in pressing political demands.[67] Structural political reform is clearly needed, but the negative examples of the colour revolutions, particularly the turmoil in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, highlight the need to proceed cautiously. For most Kazakhstanis, fear of instability trumps the appeal of democracy, particularly if the period of prosperous stability appears tenuous.[68]

Economically, the country's growth has been enviable, based largely on oil wealth, but even here there are serious problems. Inflation increased to double-

digit levels in 2007, and the country was severely impacted by the economic crisis of 2008–2009 and the abrupt decline in oil prices. Labour unrest, strikes and serious industrial accidents have occurred, most notably in foreign operations (Chinese, Turkish and Indian) where mistreatment of indigenous workers generates nationalist resentment. Growing resource nationalism has led the government to renegotiate deals concluded in the early 1990s when the country was weak and vulnerable. Since 2002 the state has pressured foreign oil and gas firms to concede controlling shares to state-owned KazMunaiGaz, and production sharing agreements (PSAs), which grant favourable tax treatment to investors, are being phased out. Energy Minister Saut Mynbayev confirmed that in 2007 Kazakhstan had abrogated 97 contracts with companies that had not met their financial obligations. The government also reviewed contracts in the power generating and mining industries.[69] While these assertions of nationalism have been popular, the government's actions have not been in response to public demands from labour or other groups.

As in most post-communist countries, organized labour groups in Kazakhstan are weak and seldom act politically. The Federation of Trade Unions, successor to the old Soviet trade union, is sanctioned by the government and shuns confrontation in most cases.[70] The two larger independent labour unions – the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Kazakhstan and the Confederation of Labor – do not seem to be active in defending workers' rights. Most forms of labour activism are localized and generally consist of protests or strikes that vocalize specific grievances. It also appears that the more highly publicized instances of worker activism are those against foreign operated firms. These cases involve nationalistic grievances against foreign workers and managers, and may involve manoeuvring by political elites to force kickbacks or acquire assets.[71] But labour activism per se is not an important component of Kazakh political society.

The role and participation of women in political and civil society reveal much about the democratic potential of a country. Kazakhstan's gender relations are marked by paternalism, as in all Central Asian societies, but the government has sought to craft policies sympathetic to women, and the Strategy for Gender Equality 2006–2016 provides for quotas that would reserve fully 30% of top executive and legislative positions for women.[72] While women constitute over half of all civil servants, and are well represented in the judicial system, in 2007 they accounted for only 9% of deputies to the national Parliament (Majilis), and just 17% of district and local *maslikhats* (councils). None of the regional or district *akims* (executives) were women.[73] In other words, women are well-represented in mid-level positions of authority, but noticeably absent from the top governing posts.

Women play a major role in leadership of Kazakhstan's NGOs, and they are comparatively well-represented in business, education, and the bureaucracy. By some estimates, the number of women working in NGOs is three times larger than the number of men.[74] Women are particularly active in NGOs dealing with women's issues, women in business, and ecology questions. The large number of NGOs dealing with women's issues can be effective in the 'non-political'

arenas of child labour, family problems and spousal abuse, professional and business networking, ecological health, and human trafficking. Women's groups operate crisis centres using government grants, and in general the state has been supportive of this sector of civil society.

A favourable international context can strengthen democratic political tendencies. In contrast to Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan has been an active participant in global society, seeking a leading role in organizations such as the OSCE. In November 2007 Kazakhstan secured the chairmanship of the OSCE for 2010, to the dismay of some human rights organizations. However, it appears that this quest for international acceptance exerted only a moderate influence on government policies. Democracy promotion projects such as those funded by the US State Department, the Soros Foundation, the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute are tolerated by the Kazakh government, but are subject to various legal and administrative barriers.[75] In September 2005, for example, Nazarbayev warned foreign-supported NGOs against undertaking political activities (such as financing political parties) that could undermine the state, as had happened in Kyrgyzstan. At the President's urging, parliament proposed a law regulating foreign NGOs similar to the one adopted by Russia's Duma, although the law was eventually overruled by the Constitutional Council.

A number of earlier studies of NGO operations in Central Asia have argued that the interests and strategies of international actors have often hindered rather than enhanced the role of NGOs in Kazakhstan, specifically those involved in the energy sector and environmental protection. Pauline Jones Luong and Erika Weinthal, for example, found that in the 1990s international NGOs provided support for local Kazakh NGOs, leading to growth in numbers. However, there were unintended negative consequences of international assistance, including local NGOs tailoring their foci to the particular environmental agendas of international NGOs, and a decline in membership and political significance of Kazakh organizations as the political climate worsened.[76]

These findings may be overly pessimistic, premised as they are on a liberal reading of civil society that stresses contestation over cooperation. Kazakhstan's political culture has elements of a genuine civil society that are often dismissed by both Kazakhstani specialists and outside observers because they tend to support the authoritarian government. Generally, most NGOs are allowed to function unhindered, but only if they shun sensitive political issues and avoid criticizing senior officials. Field interviews and discussions with leaders of specialized groups revealed that many do not consider their activities to be political. This may be the result of focusing more on implementation than formulation of policies, or it may be the result of a technocratic mindset that discounts the political in policy making.

Clan and religion are two vital social forces in Central Asia that are recognized as fundamentally political in nature; either could be inimical to a democratic civic culture, though the evidence in the Kazakh context is mixed. The following section provides a brief overview of clan and religion as they relate to Kazakhstan's civil society.

Clan and religion

A discussion of civil society in Kazakhstan must consider the complex and subtle role of clan networks. To the extent that clans focus identities along sub-national dimensions, the development of a strong national identity may be impeded. Kathleen Collins' study of clans and politics in Central Asia focuses on this phenomenon in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but she asserts her findings on the importance of clan politics also apply equally to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.[77] Clan networks, Collins argues, interpenetrate formal institutions, undermine regime consolidation, and make long-term change, growth and democratization more problematic. If one accepts the argument that clans promote bonding rather than bridging capital, using Putnam's categories, then Kazakhstan's relatively weak clan system should facilitate a stronger civil society in the Central Asian context.[78] The existence of clan politics is a significant factor in conceptualizing civil society in Central Asia, since clan identities are ascriptive and exclusivist, and therefore tend not to foster cross-cutting linkages. Collins treats clan networks, clientelism, and corruption as analytically separate phenomena, although she notes that all three are present in Central Asia. Moreover, she claims that all three are seen as largely corrosive to the state.[79]

Collins argues that poor economic conditions provide a rationale for the persistence of clan networks. Kazakhstan, however, is an exception to this pattern, having pursued successful market reforms driven in large part by the need for foreign investment in the energy sector. It is the only Central Asian case in which a more cohesive and effective state is developing. In this context, clan identities may have less impact on political stability; in addition, clan ties may be gradually eroding in Kazakhstan.[80] It should also be noted in this context that clan networks consist of nested identities that can easily coexist with, and may even facilitate the operation of, secondary associations, such as women's or ecology groups. If true, this would imply that clan ties in Kazakhstan are not necessarily inimical to a more democratic political culture.

Edward Schatz argues that clan politics in Kazakhstan has been unintentionally preserved by the Soviet internationalist project and persisted under the Nazarbayev government's ethno-nationalist state-building strategy. In the post-communist period Nazarbayev followed a dualistic policy: a clientelistic strategy designed to ensure considerable privileges and wealth for his extended family and elite members of the Elder *zhuz*, together with a balancing among the three umbrella clans to avoid the sort of destabilizing conflict that emasculated other transitioning states.[81] Much like Vladimir Putin in Russia, Nazarbayev has worked diligently to centralize state control. Social groups that might weaken the national government – whether political, religious, regional, ethnic, or clan-based – are closely monitored. The constitutional amendments adopted in summer 2007 provided for greater local self-government, but the central government has refused to consider adopting a federal system, and regional and local governments are allocated virtually all resources from Astana.[82]

Religion's impact on Kazakhstan's political culture is potentially a source of tension, and has been closely monitored and controlled by the government. One concern is the possibility of ethno-religious conflict between the two major groups – Kazakh Muslims, who now make up about 53% of the population, and Orthodox Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians who are now about 30% of the total. Both religions have undergone resurgence in recent years, with the construction of hundreds of new mosques and churches and the restoration of older structures. Evidence of religious tensions, however, is scarce.[83]

Islamic revival in Kazakhstan is more a matter of rediscovering national identity and a return to national traditions than a reassertion of spirituality.[84] Weddings, for example, combine elements of Muslim religion, Kazakh traditions, and Western practices. Very few Kazakhs attend mosque regularly, and only a minority eschew alcohol. Survey research finds that religion does not account for differences in adherence to democratic values in Kazakhstan (and Kyrgyzstan); socio-economic variables such as level of education, age, and views on the state of the economy provide more robust explanations of positive or negative attitudes toward democracy.[85]

Officially, the government has promoted a pluralist, tolerant approach to religion. President Nazarbayev, like other Central Asian leaders, used religion and nationalism in the years immediately following independence to bolster his legitimacy. More recently, Nazarbayev has enhanced his international reputation by hosting congresses of world religions to promote inter-religious dialogue, tolerance, mutual understanding and harmony among different cultures and religions. The government's policy on religious tolerance and pluralism earned praise from prominent politicians and leaders around the world; these have included such luminaries as Mortimer Zuckerman, Chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, President George W. Bush, and Pope John Paul II.

The emergence of Taliban rule in neighbouring Afghanistan in 1996, and subsequent activities of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, and other radical Muslim movements constitute perceived threats to secular rule in Central Asia. Kazakhstan, with its nomadic background and tolerant Sufi traditions, may not be fertile ground for religious extremism, but the appeal of Islam is growing among Kazakh youth. Religious sentiment is also strong among the thousands of Uzbeks who have found work in Kazakhstan – the southern border city of Shymkent is considered a stronghold of Islamic radicalism. To preempt the appeal of Islam, the government has sought to channel and control religion. Authorities prefer all Islamic organizations be part of the official Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, to ensure that religious activities do not contradict state goals. In the interest of stability, the Kazakh Constitution proscribes the formation of political parties along religious or ethnic lines, and heavy penalties have been adopted for religious organizations that may engage in 'terrorist' or 'extremist' activities.[86]

Rather than actively suppress potentially powerful social forces, the central government has adopted a cooptation strategy of providing public funding,

encouraging members of the loyal Nur-Otan party to direct activities in pro-governmental directions, and harassing organizations that are overly critical of the government. The umbrella organization *Ak orda* (White Horde) provides a representative example of a government-approved NGO with a religious and nationalist component. Founded in 2005, *Ak orda* promotes Kazakhstani patriotism, national culture and traditions, veterans' affairs, sports, moderate devotion to Islam, and business networking. The group is affiliated with a number of social and political organizations, including the Nur-Otan party, and the president of the organization is Kairat Satybaldy, who served two tours of duty in the Kazakh Committee for National Security (successor to the Kazakh KGB), and was vice-president of the state-owned Kazakhoil company. Satybaldy is also President Nazarbayev's nephew. Not coincidentally, the term *Ak orda* (White Horde) is the same nomenclature used for the presidential palace, and the organization uncritically backs Nazarbayev's goals.[87]

Additional constraints on civil society

Political cultures cannot be transformed rapidly. In interviews conducted in Kazakhstan by this author during 2006–2008, many democratic activists stressed the importance of changing the psychology of average citizens and officials in order to shift the political culture away from the *kollektiv* mentality of the communist era and toward a more personal sense of responsibility for governance.[88] Few young people in Kazakhstan have internalized a concept of active citizenship. Those who do participate in politics are often the less sophisticated, more traditional rural youth easily mobilized by pro-presidential parties. Many respondents suggested the need for educating youth in democratic values through workshops or the university system.[89]

One issue that has not been adequately researched is the deep divide between urban and rural populations in Kazakhstan. As in most developing countries, urban residents are better educated, more affluent, less religious, and less authoritarian than their rural counterparts. This divide is particularly acute in Kazakhstan, with a population of only fifteen million dispersed throughout a territory the size of Western Europe. Few studies have adequately explored the urban–rural gap and its implications for Kazakhstan's political development. Interviews with leaders of NGOs and members of the legislatures at various levels indicated that connections between civil society and legislatures are developing at both the regional and national levels, but these linkages may be more important at the regional level given Kazakhstan's huge geographic expanse and broadly dispersed population. However, NGOs are concentrated almost entirely in the major cities; very few rural people participate in civic organizations, and this will limit the potential for democratic progress in the villages.[90]

Constitutional reforms in 2007 ostensibly strengthened the powers of the Majilis and the local *maslikhats*, supposedly shifting the country from a presidential toward a presidential-parliamentary system while promoting greater local

autonomy. The reforms replaced the majoritarian district electoral system with proportional representation according to party lists, with a 7% threshold. The government (prime minister and cabinet) are to be formed based on a parliamentary majority.[91] However, the fact that a large number of amendments proposed by the President's constitutional commission were forced through parliament in three days, followed by the overwhelming victory of Nur-Otan in the August 2007 elections, illustrate the less than democratic nature of these changes. Nonetheless, fieldwork suggests that Kazakhstan's assemblies, particularly the regional and city *maslikhats*, have the potential to evolve into functioning deliberative institutions.

Several factors have combined to frustrate the emergence of the concept of a loyal opposition and the normal give and take of a fully democratic society in Kazakhstan. First is the personal influence of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who consistently promotes unity and stability, and tends to advocate a Soviet-style view of formal political opposition as anathema. Second is the overwhelming dominance in the national Majilis and the regional *maslikhats* of a single pro-presidential party, Nur Otan. A third factor is the extraordinary performance of the oil-based national economy in recent years, and the consequent social and political stability. Not surprisingly, most Kazakhs prefer a stable, affluent environment, and credit Nazarbayev with their country's relatively favourable position in Central Asia. Virtually all Kazakhstanis with whom this author spoke, even the most democratically-minded, viewed the 'color revolutions' of Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine and Georgia as doing more harm than good in those societies.

Much of the success of a democratic, civil society depends upon the development of a genuine rule of law in Kazakhstan. In discussions with officials knowledgeable on human rights it became clear that neither officials nor average citizens have adequate information on their constitutional rights regarding political participation, which makes enforcement problematic.[92] There still exists a paternalistic strain in the political culture, reinforced by the president's efforts to concentrate power in his office. In contrast to Russia, where there is strident anti-Americanism and a backlash against foreign support for NGOs, Kazakh officials tolerate or even welcome Western links. Nazarbayev's pretensions to regional and global leadership, the country's manoeuvring to obtain OSCE leadership (secured for 2010), and repeated statements about building democracy constrain the government's ability to repress political activism.

Conclusion

As in many of the more authoritarian post-communist states, Kazakhstan has addressed the tension between the requirements of building state power and national identity, and the need for some accommodation with civil society, by co-opting, regulating and pressuring civil society organizations into a cooperative rather than a confrontational relationship with the state. Powerful executive organs allow civil society to operate within a narrow space, tolerating activities generally

considered to be instrumental, apolitical or only mildly sensitive. While the country's education and income levels, combined with significant domestic activism and external assistance, would suggest a favourable environment for the development of civil society, at least compared to other post-Soviet countries, the serious obstacles faced by Kazakhstan's civil society should caution us about the prospects for building viable civil societies in other more repressive settings. Understanding the mix of cooperative and contestational elements in a recipient country's political culture can enable foreign donors to more effectively assist the development of civil society.

Despite the authoritarian elements of the super-presidential political system, Kazakh political culture is considerably more complex, and more democratic in orientation, than many Western observers have acknowledged. There are historical elements in the nomadic tradition which, when combined with the educational achievements of the Soviet era and the rapid economic growth of the post-communist period, give Kazakhstan an advantage over its Central Asian neighbours in developing a healthy civil society. There is an increasingly affluent, well-educated middle class concentrated in the larger cities that could become politicized in the event of political liberalization (such as that accompanying a leadership transition), or were the economy to suffer a prolonged recession. On the positive side, Kazakhstan's diverse society and culture of religious and ethnic tolerance bodes well for democratic development. This tolerance has been encouraged by the government, and stands in marked contrast to ethnic tensions in other post-Soviet states, Russia included.

The form that civil society in Kazakhstan has taken, however, is different from that familiar to political observers in liberal democratic societies. Kazakhstan's civil society is less willing to confront the state, more cooperative with the authoritarian system, and wary of the potential for civic activism to degenerate into instability. Few civic organizations have the resources to sustain their activities without state backing, so civil society has evolved into a mix of grass-roots organizations and groups sponsored and supported by the state. Clearly the Kazakhstan government has sought to co-opt the non-governmental movement in support of its policies, by allocating state monies to support and control NGOs, but in doing so it may have nourished social forces that it does not fully dominate. While contestative elements are not entirely absent in Kazakhstan's civil society, they have at least for now been implicitly subordinated (or sacrificed) in return for effective governance.

This research supports the works of scholars such as White, Chandhoke, Glasius, and Walzer who favour a broader analytic framework that assesses both cooperative and confrontational elements in civil society.[93] Thinking of civil society as mixing forms of cooperation and contestation, with the state assuming supportive or constraining roles, is more productive for comparative studies than a simple either-or approach. A pro-active state does not necessarily make civil society undemocratic – even mature Western democracies provide direct or indirect support for non-governmental organizations. All civil societies include

elements of cooperation and contestation in state–society relations; the key is the relative degree of space accorded each type of activity, the degree of state intervention, and the cultural context within which these forces interact.

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Notes

1. Research for this article was conducted over a three-year period (from 2006 through 2008), and is based on semi-structured interviews with representatives of major non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academics, and government officials based in Almaty, Astana, and Karaganda, together with the results of a series of workshops on the subject of civil society conducted in conjunction with Kazakh NGOs over the period 2007–2008 in seven major cities, the results of which are published in a number of monographs, some of which are cited here. This study also draws on government documents and the research of Kazakh scholars, and it incorporates data from the University of Strathclyde Centre for the Study of Public Policy.
2. See Jones Luong and Weinthal, 'The NGO Paradox', 1267–84; and various chapters in Ruffin and Waugh, *Civil Society in Central Asia*.
3. Freedom House civil society scores for the 15 post-Soviet states ranged from a strong 1.50 for Lithuania (1.0 is the highest possible), to an absolutely repressive 7.0 for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan received a moderate 5.75. Freedom House website, http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=257&year=2006 (accessed December 2009).
4. On the utility of case studies in comparative politics, see Gerring, 'The Case Study: What it is and What it Does'.
5. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*; Putnam, *Bowling Alone*; Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*.
6. Harrison and Huntington, *Culture Matters*; Harrison and Berger, *Developing Cultures*.
7. Fukuyama, 'Social Capital, Civil Society and Development', 7–20; Elshtain, 'A Call to Civil Society', 11–18.
8. Encarnación, 'Civil Society and the Consolidation of Democracy in Spain', 53–79.
9. Shevtsova, *Russia – Lost in Transition*; and Olcott, *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise*.
10. Personal interview, Bakhutzhamal Bekturganova, President, Association of Sociologists and Political Scientists, Almaty, Kazakhstan, June 2006.
11. This attitude has been expressed to the author during numerous visits.
12. See Lomasky, 'Classical Liberalism and Civil Society'.
13. Gellner, *Encounters with Nationalism*.
14. White, 'Civil Society, Democratization and Development (I)', 375–90; Chandhoke, 'The "Civil" and the "Political" in Civil Society', 1–24.

15. Giovanni Sartori dealt with the problems of conceptual stretching in his classic article, 'Concept Misinformation in Comparative Politics', 1033–53.
16. Fareed Zakaria, 'The Rise of Illiberal Democracy', 22–43; O'Donnell, 'Delegative Democracy', 55–69; Collier and Levitsky, 'Democracy with Adjectives', 430–51.
17. Walzer, *Toward a Global Civil Society.*
18. See Sedaitis and Butterfield, *Perestroika from Below.*
19. This is the general assessment of the articles in Ruffin and Waugh, *Civil Society in Central Asia*.
20. By an activist state, I mean a strong, proactive state that consistently intervenes in society, in contrast to liberalism's notion of a limited role for the state. Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev has repeatedly stressed the connection between a strong state and economic development. See his January 2010 'state of the nation' address, at http://www.kazakhemb.org.il/?CategoryID=188&ArticleID=1019&Page=1 (accessed January 2010).
21. Glasius, Lewis, and Seckenelgin, *Exploring Civil Society.*
22. Michael Walzer argues for an inclusive definition of civil society in 'The Concept of Civil Society', *Toward a Global Civil Society*, p. 7.
23. See Chandhoke, 'The "Civil" and the "Political" in Civil Society'. It is worth noting that even in the United States, with a strong civil society and relatively limited government, the state provides support for secular and faith-based non-profits (through the Department of Health and Human Services), the Supreme Court has recognized the right of state support for secular activities in religious institutions, and legally registered non-profits have tax exempt status granted by the Internal Revenue Service. Some years ago Jack Walker found that the rapid expansion of interest groups in post-WW II America was in large part due to financial assistance from sources such as foundations, individuals, and government, rather than endogenous efforts. See his 'The Origins and Maintenance of Interest Groups in America', 390–406.
24. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*; Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.
25. Kuron, 'Overcoming Totalitarianism', 72–4; Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*.
26. Foley and Edwards, 'The Paradox of Civil Society', 38–52.
27. The term hegemonic electoral authoritarian regime is from Diamond, 'Thinking about Hybrid Regimes', 21–35.
28. On the history of Central Asia from ancient through Soviet times, see Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*; and Roy, *The New Central Asia*.
29. See Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*, 135–68.
30. On Kazakhstan's political and economic development following independence, see Bhavna Dave, *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, Language and Power*; and Olcott, *Kazakhstan*. On Central Asia in general, see Olcott, *Central Asia's Second Chance*; and Rumer, *Central Asia at the End of the Transition*.
31. I am indebted to Andrey Kazantsev for calling this to my attention. Soviet data are admittedly imprecise, but adequate for purposes of comparison. The data are presented in Kazantsev, *Bol'shaia igra s neizvestnymi pravilamy*, 123–5.
32. Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy.*
33. Mahnovski, Akhramov, and Karasik, *Economic Dimensions of Security in Central Asia*, 4–8.
34. M. Steven Fish and Matthew Kroenig amass a wealth of data showing a correlation between the strength of national legislatures and democracy in *The Handbook of National Legislatures: A Global Survey.*
35. While Akayev lasted until March 2005, Makhamov was forced out of office by Tajikistan's parliament in September 1991.

36. On the Sovietization of Central Asia, see Roy, *The New Central Asia*, esp. chapters 4–6.
37. Edward Schatz, *Modern Clan Politics*, 50–2.
38. Ibid.
39. Gürgen, et al. *Economic Reforms in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan*; Olcott, *Kazakhstan's Unfulfilled Promise*.
40. Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy*. For the argument that rentier petro-states tend to be less democratic, see Ross, 'Does Oil Hinder Democracy?', 325–61. Thad Dunning, however, finds that resource rents may promote either autocracy or democracy. Dunning, *Crude Democracy: Natural Resource Wealth and Political Regimes*.
41. Daly, *Kazakhstan's Emerging Middle Class*.
42. Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*; Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy.*
43. Freedom House asks experts to evaluate countries on a number of questions relating to the financial viability and vibrancy of civil society, legal protections accorded by the state, organizational capacity and freedom to organize, and freedom from political pressure. While the measures are not absolute, they do provide a basis for comparing nations, with a score of 1.0 representing the highest levels of democratic progress, and a 7.0 representing the lowest level. A fuller explanation of the methodology is available at the Freedom House website, http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=352&ana_page=347&year=2008 (accessed November 2009).
44. Inglehart, 'The Worldviews of Islamic Publics in Global Perspective', World Values Survey website, http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/ (accessed November 2009).
45. I am indebted to Richard Rose, University of Strathclyde Centre for the Study of Public Policy, for kindly sharing this database with me.
46. Dobraev, 'Demokratiia i politicheskoe uchastie', 41.
47. State Department, *2008 Human Rights Report – Kazakhstan*; Human Rights Watch, 'An Atmosphere of Quiet Repression: Freedom of Religion, Assembly and Expression in Kazakhstan'.
48. Dobraev, 'Demokratiia i politicheskoe uchastie', 42.
49. EBRD, 'Transition Report 2007: People in Transition'.
50. US Department of State, *2008 Human Rights Report – Kazakhstan*.
51. Kucera, 'Kazakhstan: New Political Party Borrows from Western Right'; *The Independent*, 'After Nazarbayev: The Dictator, his Daughter, and a Dynasty at War'.
52. Rezvushkina, 'Rol' zhenskikh NPO i postroenii grazhdanskogo obshchestva'.
53. 785 students received Bolashak scholarships in the decade from 1994–2004. The programme was expanded after 2004, with 1796 scholarships awarded in 2005 and 778 in 2006. Data from the Kazakh government's Center for International Programs website, http://www.edu-cip.kz/eng/?option=com_content&task=view&id=167&Itemid=279 (accessed June 2009).
54. Full disclosure – this author is a consultant to Eurasian National University in Astana.
55. US State Department, *2008 Human Rights Report – Kazakhstan*.
56. Human Rights Watch Press Release, 14 July 2009, http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/07/14/kazakhstan-rescind-new-media-restrictions (accessed July 2009).
57. The International Research and Exchanges Board's Media Sustainability Index 2009 noted improvement in Kazakhstan's media record in recent years, giving it an overall score of 1.68 out of a possible 4.0. However, overall the report judged media freedoms to be well below democratic standards. Accessed at http://www.irex.org/programs/MSI_EUR/2009/EE_MSI_09_casia_Kazakhstan.pdf (accessed November 2009).
58. Lillis, 'Kazakhstan: Activists Assail Internet Law as Step Back for Democratization'; Maher, 'Twittering the Tyrants: the New Media's Role in Authoritarian Regimes'.

59. Martha Olcott discusses the evolution of presidential power and the emasculation of the legislature in, *Kazakhstan's Unfulfilled Promise*, esp. 87–127.
60. Isaacs, 'The Parliamentary Election in Kazakhstan, August 2007, 381–5.
61. Nurshayeva, 'Kazakhstan Adopts Tough Privacy Protection Law'.
62. Personal interview, Vladimir Redkokashin, Astana city maslikhat deputy, Astana, June 2006.
63. Kalashnikova, 'Razvitie institutov grazhdanskogo obshchestva i ikh vzaimodeistvie c organami gosupravleniia', 73–9.
64. Yatsenko, 'Parliamentary Elections in Kazakhstan: New "Old" Model for the New Independent States'.
65. Personal interview, Kazbek Kazkenov, Head of International Department, Nur-Otan party, Astana, June 2008.
66. Personal interview, Sarat Kushkumbaev, First Deputy Director, Kazakh Institute of Strategic Studies, Almaty, June 2006.
67. Daly, *Kazakhstan's Emerging Middle Class*.
68. Personal interview, Bakhytzhamal Bekturganova, President, Association of Sociologists and Political Scientists, Almaty, June 2006.
69. Lillis, Kazakhstan to Foreign Investors: It's Our Way, or the Highway'.
70. Nazarbayev has encouraged labour unions to make collective agreements in the spirit of 'social partnership', and the responsibility for strengthening trade unions is seen as resting largely with the state. Shermimkulov, 'Razvitie profsoiuzov v Kazakhstane: problem i perspektivy'.
71. Yermukhanov, 'Striking Coal Miners in Kazakhstan are Merely Pawns in a Much Bigger Game'; Dave, 'Kazakhstan, Nations in Transit 2007'.
72. Personal interview, Aitkul Samakova, Adviser to the President, Chairperson of the National Commission on Family Affairs and Gender Policy, Astana, May 2006.
73. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 'Women's Anti-Discrimination Committee Takes up Report of Kazakhstan; Told "Evolutionary" – not Revolutionary – Change Shaping Women's Progress', United Nations General Assembly.
74. Shakirova, 'Natsional'nyi otchet o sostoianii reform v sisteme vysshego obrazovaniia i o sostoianii gendernogo obrazovaniia v strane'.
75. Personal interview, Joshua Burgin, Country Director, International Republican Institute, Almaty, June 2006.
76. Luong and Weinthal, 'The NGO Paradox'. See also Abramson, 'A Critical Look at NGOs and Civil Society as Means to an End in Uzbekistan', 240–50; and Cooley and Ron, 'The NGO Scramble', 5–39.
77. Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*.
78. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 22.
79. Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*.
80. Ibid., 47.
81. Schatz, *Modern Clan Politics*, 95–112.
82. 'Vystuplenie Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan N.A. Nazarbayeva na sovmestnom zasedanii Palat Parlamenta Respubliki Kazakhstan', 16 May 2007, accessed at the presidential website, http://www.akorda.kz/www/www_akorda_kz.nsf/sections?OpenForm&id_doc=A9F8632CF20A5F59462572DD00284098&lang=ru&L1=L2&L2=L2-15 (accessed November 2009).
83. This may be due to government proscriptions against publicizing religious or ethnic tensions, but this author's field experience confirms the generally tolerant relations among different religious persuasions and ethnic groups. The one exception would be migrant ethnic Chinese, who are generally disliked.
84. Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*, 116–39.

85. Rose, 'How Muslims View Democracy: Evidence from Central Asia', 109.
86. Rouben Azizian, 'Islamic Radicalism in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: Implications for the Global War on Terrorism'.
87. *Ak Orda, Respublikanskoe dvizhenie* (Astana, nd).
88. Personal interview, Jabayhan Abdildin, Chairman, Presidential Human Rights Commission, Astana, June 2006.
89. Personal interview, Jamilla Asanova, Executive Director, Civil Society Development Association, Almaty, July 2006.
90. Personal interview, Amina Turgulova, Senior Grants Officer, US Embassy, Almaty, July 2006.
91. *Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan: O vnesenii izmenenii i dopolnenii v Konstitutsiiu Respubliki Kazakhstan*, No. 254-III, 21 May 2007.
92. Personal interview, Bolat Baikadamov, Commissioner on Human Rights, Astana, June 2006.
93. White, 'Civil Society'; Chandhoke, 'The "Civil" and the "Political" in Civil Society'; Glasius, Lewis, and Seckenelgin, *Exploring Civil Society*; Walzer, *Toward a Global Civil Society.*

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