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## Rico Isaacs. Party System Formation in Kazakhstan. Between formal and informal politics. New York: Routledge, 2011.

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**Rico Isaacs. *Party System Formation in Kazakhstan. Between formal and informal politics.* New York: Routledge, 2011.**

Rico Isaacs offers an innovative analysis of post-Soviet Central Asian politics. The book is based on a PhD thesis rich in theoretical interpretation, in-depth fieldwork, and historical analysis. The six chapters of the book flow smoothly from a general overview (Chapter 1) to theoretical aspects (Chapter 2) to a historical account of party system formation in Kazakhstan (Chapter 3). Through Chapters 4, 5, and 6, Isaacs moves on to focus on parties and party politics in contemporary Kazakhstan by interpreting the data collected during his fieldwork, a “mixed-method qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews, documentary data, and observation” (p.16), which features the impressive feedback of over 50 party elites, experts, and journalists.

Isaacs challenges the “clan politics” theory dominating academic analysis of Central Asian politics—the theory which defends that the authority, legitimacy, and efficacy of political actors is ultimately determined by clan affiliation,<sup>1</sup> which has regrettably led to a caricatured picture of Central Asian societies. To provide a more accurate interpretation of the regional and historical influences at play within the country’s politics, he relies on the notion of *neopatrimonialism*—a system in which political leaders (patrons) use state resources to create a “patron-client relationship” to secure the loyalty of the general population (clients) and create powerful networks of support around a single leader or party—which, in Kazakhstan, Isaacs sees as being a result of the *patrimonial communism* developed previously, particularly during Brezhnev’s era. Importantly, he underlines that “kinship is not the main driver determining the influence and power of patron-client networks” (p.65). To examine the development of party politics in Kazakhstan, the text provides a pertinent chronological framework that distinguishes Kazakhstan’s recent stages of political transformation: emerging pluralism (1990-1994), consolidation of presidential power (1995-1998), and pro-presidential consolidation (1999-2007). Similar trends are recognizable in Russian and Central Asian post-Soviet politics, with the early 90s presenting a picture completely different from the 2000s.

To account for the sequence of events that saw the development of the neopatrimonialism to which Isaacs refers, he provides close analysis of the actors and conditions that contributed to Kazakh political transformation. The author describes in Chapter 3 how President Nazarbayev—the country’s first elected (and still currently serving) president—expanded his constitutional powers to the detriment of the legislative branch when, in 1994, he dissolved the country’s parliament after the country’s constitutional court ruled in favor of Tatiana Kvyatkovskaya, a failed parliamentary candidate who claimed that electoral districts were drawn unfavorably. The court agreed. In apparent “acquiesce” to the ruling of the court, Nazarbayev—in a move that ultimately consolidated his own presidential power—simply dissolved the parliament instead of contending with requiring electoral district reform. This consolidated power contributed to the development of “loyal deputies,” who were rewarded by Nazarbayev so as to ensure reliable cadres and new business elite groups. This consolidation was followed by the so-called “elite-fragmentation” (1998-2004), in which the centralized authority of Nazarbayev’s Nur Otan party, the largest in the country, began to fragment somewhat, starting with the move of former prime-minister Kazhegeldin to the opposition in 1999, followed by the emergence of the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK) party, founded by Mukhtar Abliazov, and, last, by the suicide of Nazarbayev’s son-in-law, Rakhat Aliev, who was under investigation for multiple crimes,

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<sup>1</sup> See Kathleen Collins *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*. Cambridge University Press (2006) and Frederick Starr “*Clans, Authoritarian Rulers, and Parliaments in Central Asia*”. Silk Road Papers, CACI-SRSP (2006).

including kidnapping and murder and who, it was feared, might succeed Nazarbayev in office. Dr. Isaacs shows that the political trajectory of Kazakhstan is similar to those of Russia and Belorussia, while other post-communist countries like Romania or Bulgaria were very much influenced by the EU accession process. Finally, the author takes into account the spectrum of external global and regional influences on party politics in Kazakhstan.

The institutional constraints on existing political parties in Kazakhstan are the main focus of Chapter 4, in which the author discusses “virtual parties” and the marginalization of opposition parties. Major attention is given to the constitutional changes that have shaped electoral design, especially during the early years of independent Kazakhstan, when the president ensured (via a system of patronage and rewards) a large delegation of supporters in the legislature despite not having a strong presidential party (p.87). The introduction of seven percent threshold in 1999 (similarly introduced in Russia one year before), in which only parties that achieved a minimum of 7 percent of the vote could hold parliamentary seats, “limited opportunities for political parties not favored by the presidential administration” (p.89). The introduction of further constitutional changes in 2007 removed term limits for Nazarbayev, eliminated district races for the lower houses and parliament, and required nationwide proportional representation, “[resulting] in [a] one party-parliament and the marginalization of all other political parties” (p. 90).

In Chapter 5, the author endeavors to frame parties into classical left-right-center positions. He analyzes the parties’ programs and values and underscores the centrality of personality in Kazakh politics. His investigation, however, portrays many parties—including those of *Adilet*, *Ak Zhol*, *Auyl*, *Nur Otan*, Party of Patriots, *Rukhaniyat*, *Nagiz Ak Zhol*—as having no clear programmatic statements and being very close, ideologically. Moreover, he says, several parties are “complicit in legitimizing the proto-hegemonic dominance of Nur Otan” (p. 126). In Chapter 6, Isaacs attempts to explain the dominance of the Nur Otan party, Nazarbayev’s leadership, and party-society relations in Kazakhstan, defining the latter as “passive” and “disconnected.” Indeed, the author should have discussed in greater detail the implications of one of his interviewees’ remarks: “People do not trust political parties...” (p.133) and explored the indication that political parties are not the driving forces in Kazakh society. Despite this shortcoming, the author finds the key answers for the centrality of Nazarbayev’s leadership to rely upon the foundation of stability, peace, and the progress of the Kazakh economy during recent years, which are more than sufficient to maintain power in many developing countries.

The text does contain some notable weaknesses. In answering the questions related to party politics, questionable is Isaacs’ study of Kazakh social stratification via the consideration of *Zhuz*—the clan affiliations that divide Kazakh society into “tribal” genealogical groups that are said to classify social and political processes, underlie the legitimacy of individuals’ claims to political posts, and define, at least in part, the extent to which a political official is able to exert authority. He asserts that even though some leading Kazakh figures do come from the same *Zhuz* (thus implying a “clan unity” among them), it can hardly be the case that all political leaders and bureaucrats simply come from the same *Zhuz* or that *Zhuz* affiliation accounts for all political development. Second, although the author has outlined regional and global political changes, he could have given more weight to their influence on civil society. In fact, the similarities of political transitions within Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belorussia not only explain domestic party politics but also reveal the people’s needs and priorities. The uprisings and revolts these neighboring countries have collectively experienced have negatively impacted all citizens and have fortified the positions of the elites and ruling parties in the region. In particular, the Kyrgyz experience of 2010, in which the ousting of the president resulted in increased ethnic tension, violence, death, and displacement, ultimately leading to the consolidation of a new parliamentary system, has cast

a dark shadow on Central Asian societies. This may partly explain what Isaacs calls the “passiveness” of Kazakh society, which accepts the *status quo* rather than agitating for change only to risk falling victim to the same social and economic unrest that have befallen Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, and Georgia. Additionally, the events in Zhanaozen in 2011, in which striking Kazakh oil workers were killed by police during a protest, appears to sufficiently prove to Kazakh citizens that social demands in Kazakhstan do not fall completely on deaf ears, as demonstrated by the fact that the Kazakh ruling elite did very quickly react to the Zhanaozen situation by complying with the workers’ requests. Perhaps in this way, the citizens of Kazakhstan perceive their government to be “not that bad” or, at least, not bad enough to warrant a groundswell for change.

In his text, Isaacs explains how Kazakh society has avoided fragmentation along party lines by showing that Kazakh political parties do not operate on ethnic, religious, or racial grounds, while, in contrast, the experience in Kyrgyzstan exposes how the “ethnic card” can easily be played in Central Asia. However, the author could have shed more light on social cohesion in order to elucidate the apparent lack of grass-roots initiatives or “group forming” within the general population on social and economic grounds, which could drive more active participation from civil society and facilitate the emergence of more progressive parties.

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