

## Trip to Kazakhstan

Independent American Center of Political Monitoring, Oklahoma City, OK was participating in observing Kazakhstan's elections on December 4, 2005 along with its older partner – Mission of International Institute of Eastern Europe and the Former USSR, based in Israel and headed by Mr. Alex Tsinker.

Our primary focus for the past several years had been on the countries of Latin America, namely Ecuador (2002) and Honduras (2005) and we ventured off to the former USSR for the first time. Although we are a relatively new organization in the democratic arena, we are led by a group of people devoted to the promotion of democracy, the rule of law and enhancement of the electoral process that meets international standards. We believe that everyone has a fundamental inherent right to be heard and to take part in the building of their country's future.

My name is Lidia Lawson, I am the President of IACPM who had just returned from a trip to Kazakhstan for the Presidential elections held on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005. IACPM along with other observer-organizations took part in all key stages of the electoral process beginning with getting acquainted with the election-related laws and legislations specific to Kazakhstan, meeting with the presidential candidates during their campaign, traveling to different parts of the country on election day to observe the process at work and ending with the vote count at the end of the election day.

A little bit about the country. With an area of 2.7 million square kilometers (1.56 million mi<sup>2</sup>), Kazakhstan is the ninth-largest nation in the world. It is equivalent to the size of Western Europe. Major cities include, Astana (capital since June 1998), Almaty (former capital), Chimkent, Semipalatinsk and Turkestan. The terrain extends east to west from the Caspian Sea to the Altay Mountains and north to south from the plains of Western Siberia to the oasis and desert of Central Asia. Almost one-third of the country—804,500 square kilometres—is taken up by the Kazakh Steppe, the world's largest dry steppe region. US government sources including the CIA World Fact Book and the US Census Bureau International Data Base list the current population as 16,763,795. The majority of Kazakhstanis are ethnic Kazakh; other ethnic groups include Russian, Ukrainian, Uzbek, German, and Uyghur. Religions are Sunni Muslim, Russian Orthodox, Protestant, and other. Kazakhstan is a bilingual country. The Kazakh language has the status of the "state" language, while Russian is declared the "official" language. Following the August 1991 abortive coup attempt in Moscow and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan declared independence on December 16, 1991. The years following independence have been marked by significant reforms to the Soviet command-economy and political monopoly on power. Under Nursultan Nazarbayev, who initially came to power in 1989 as the head of the Kazakh Communist Party and was eventually elected President in 1991, Kazakhstan has made significant progress toward developing a market economy, for which it was recognized by the United States in 2002. The country has enjoyed significant economic growth

since 2000, partly due to its large oil, gas, and mineral reserves. Kazakhstan has a bicameral Parliament, comprised of the lower house (the Majilis) and upper house (the Senate).

Back to the trip. We met with Mr. Alex Tsinker and Mr. Lev Vershynin of International Institute of Eastern Europe and former USSR and other members of our sister organization and spent a couple of days in Almaty witnessing the pre-election excitement of the people and meeting with the candidates and their staff working on the last minute details. In addition, we got a chance to meet with several parties running this year and to hear about their experiences campaigning, their agenda and their take on the outcome of the election to be held on December 4, 2005. The day before the elections we were split in teams of two and three people to be deployed all over the vast Kazakhstan region for the close and direct observation mission. My observation partner Mr. John Swails, head of the humanities and government department at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, OK, an experienced observer and I were deployed to the northern part of the country to the city of Karaganda, Karaganda region, famous for its steppe and cold weather.

Election morning met us with festive snow, which did not prevent the people from getting to the polling stations. We visited eleven polling precincts and returned to three of them before close to see whether the situation has changed and to observe the count. Observing the count is an important part of the observation process – it provides an opportunity to assess whether ballots are counted and reported accurately to truly reflect the choices expressed by voters. After the ballots are counted, the results of the polling-station count are usually transmitted to a regional election commission, where the regional results are tabulated and transmitted to the national level. Our goal was to monitor each level of the tabulation process and to follow the results of individual polling stations up to the national level.

We also had a great opportunity to visit the Central Counting Commission who were monitoring the results by getting live feeds from the polling stations to reflect the overall count and percentage of people voted. At the time of our visit at 6 P.M. over 67% of Karaganda have cast their votes before the 8 P.M. closing time.

Despite the cold weather and icy snow, the citizens of Karaganda were eager to be heard on the Election Day. We witnessed a line of people waiting for the election station to open at 8 A.M. From old grandmas to young 18-year olds, everyone came out to vote. It is important to note that the overall atmosphere in Karaganda was very festive. People told us this is their Holiday before the Holidays and were thus, very excited. We had a chance to speak with the officials at each precinct as well as with the domestic observers representing the running candidates and non-profit organizations such as “Pokolenie” (“Generation”). When asked, all the representatives said they were not denied in any way access to the polling stations or their observation activity. Everything was running smoothly and orderly with a great deal of organization. The voting

officials seemed very well-trained and familiar with their duties. All of the polling stations we visited had wheelchair access and help for the elderly to have access to the polls because of the icy condition. Although at some polling stations there were lines of people waiting to vote, it is representative of the citizens' eagerness to be heard and hopefulness in their country's stable future. When speaking with the native population, we were repeatedly told that people are voting for stability which they had enjoyed with the current President Nazarbaev, and they were hopeful that their homeland will continue on its way to a bright and stable future for their children and grandchildren. The only violation we had witnessed and reported was difficulty of access to the polls due to the ice on the steps, which as we observed had been remedied by having helpers for the elderly and anyone who needed help getting in and out of the polls.

As we all know, secrecy of the ballot is a fundamental principle of the free and transparent elections. The polling stations we visited employed both electronic voting and paper ballots and each citizen had a choice between the two. As we observed, the electronic voting method seemed to be popular among the younger population while the older people used the paper ballots. Each polling station was equipped with a glass see-through ballot box accessible and visible to the voters. We did not observe any group-voting or other violations of the secrecy of the ballot. Elderly people sometimes needed help with explaining how the ballot works or they had troubles reading the names in their glasses, and the electoral staff was there to explain and assist in any way they could.

Being a truly all-inclusive non-discriminatory country, Kazakhstan embraces 128 different nationalities and manages to live in peace. "We don't care if your skin color is white, black or blue, Muslim or Russian Orthodox, as long as you are a good person, you are welcome here!" -- says our cab driver who picked us up at Almaty airport. It is very apparent that the country people love their President -- we heard that from the officials and we heard that from the village folk. There may be disagreements as to the details, but the young and the old, professionals and the village folk agree on one thing -- Nazarbaev, or as the people call him "Bizdik Elbasi", which in Kazakh means "Our Leader" equals stability. They say they have enjoyed their homeland flourish in the past 14 years and get on its way to democracy and they want their children to have a stable and bright future.

It has been an honor to represent our organization in forwarding the mission to help a young democracy on another side of the globe and a tremendous experience. Our next projects include Belarus and Ukraine in March 2006.