GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION
Focus on freedom of expression and association online

Global Information Society Watch 2011

Sida

KAZAKHSTAN

MOBILISING ONLINE FOR FREE ELECTIONS

Adil Nurmakov

Introduction

Booming economic development in the mid-2000s in Kazakhstan, fuelled by soaring hydrocarbons prices and increased oil production, arrived after a harsh decade of post-Soviet transition in the country. The rise of middle-class consumerism, slow yet steady growth of salaries for employees of state-funded entities, and massive propaganda proclaiming political stability have neutralised the population's civil consciousness and political participation. The state-secured informal control over civil society through the network of GONGOs (government-organised non-governmental organisations) and use of state social order have left few authoritative NGOs in the field. The financial crisis hit the country in 2007 and highlighted a gap between the rich and the poor, invigorating the society's protest potential, albeit it driven primarily by socially vulnerable groups.

Years of economic well-being in Kazakhstan has led to rapid growth in internet penetration – which keeps on increasing. According to official statistics, the number of subscribers rose from 203,000 in 2004 to 756,500 in 2009;[1] other government sources referred to 4.7 million users online in 2009.[2] Critics say the lack of clarity in methodology used by various agencies to show off their successes leaves a narrow field for quality analysis, while excessively high numbers might be a result of counting the same users several times – connected household members, employees having access at work, mobile internet subscribers, etc. The latest official figure was 4.3 million[3] (out of a total population estimated at 16.6 million). Most connections are run by the national internet

service provider JSC Kazakhtelecom. A survey conducted by JSC Kazkontent suggests that 37% of its users use social networking sites, 27% prefer forums and 11% host/read blogs.[4]

Political background

Politics is heavily dominated by the presidency and the hidden balancing of interests between various elite groupings. Nursultan Nazarbayev, who is 71, has ruled the country since it gained independence in 1991. Although internationally praised for maintaining interethnic peace and tolerance, the authorities are regularly criticised for their human rights record and electoral practices. Most elections were held ahead of schedule and earned negative assessments from international observer missions. The 2005 presidential election resulted in 91% of votes allegedly going to the incumbent, and the last parliamentary elections in 2007 resulted in a one-party legislature.

The media environment is characterised by stiff government control over both print and broadcast media, either via direct ownership, indirect ownership through national companies or the ruling party, or, more importantly, by restrictive legislation, self-censorship and financial incentives. Opposition and critical voices are effectively excluded from the mainstream media. In these conditions, the internet appears to offer an important space for freer speech. Yet, in 2009, the authorities adopted a set of amendments to various laws that regulate online activities by attaching the status of a mass media outlet to all websites, blogs, forums, etc., and by granting them the prerogative to block web resources whose content runs counter to the national legislation.

The country's Election Law (Chapter 5) does not forbid the use of the internet in campaigns.

Presidential elections 2011

The most recent presidential elections in Kazakhstan were to take place in 2012. In late 2010, a campaign was launched, widely seen as orchestrated by the presidential administration, which sought to extend the authority of the incumbent president until December 2020. The campaigners did not use

1   Statistics Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2010) *Number of Internet Users* www.stat.kz/digital/svyaz/Pages/default.aspx

2   PRIME-TASS (2009) Количество интернет-пользователей в Казахстане превысило 4,7 млн чел. (The number of internet users in Kazakhstan exceeded 4.7 million), 19 October. www.bit.prime-tass.ru/news/show.asp?id=69452&ct=news

3   Novosti-Kazakhstan (2011) Число пользователей интернета в Казахстане достигло 4,3 млн чел. (The number of internet users has reached 4.3 million), 10 January. www.newskaz.ru/society/20110110/1037337.html

4   Kazkontent (2011) Обзор казахстанского Интернет-рынка 2007-2011 (Review of the Kazakhstani internet market 2007-2011), 14 April. kzcontent.kz/rus/kaznet_3/12

web tools at all, completely relying on administrative pressure to collect signatures and on state media propaganda to substantiate the process. The application to conduct a referendum on the issue was approved by the Central Election Commission (CEC), and the campaigners vowed to have more than five million signatures collected in close to a two-week period that included the Christmas and New Year holidays.

The internet community and blogosphere criticised the initiative in various posts and articles, some of them satirical. The opposition – the People's Party "Alga" and the Social Democratic Party "Azat", both unregistered – denounced the referendum, publishing their statements on politically friendly news sites. Unidentified enthusiasts, allegedly associated with the opposition, launched a dedicated website called *elbasy.net* ("no to leader of the nation") to collect signatures in support of Nazarbayev's resignation. According to the website, only 604 signatures arrived in the period between 3 March and 12 May of 2011.[5] Another drive-for-signatures campaign was set up by Bakhytzhan Toregozhina, a leader of the human rights and youth activism group Ar-Rukh-Hak, on a popular Russia-based online petition platform.[6] The drive, aimed against the collection of signatures in support of the referendum, generated around 200 signatures. Apparently the activists had chosen a losing approach for articulating citizen protest by using the internet – against the backdrop of the massive campaign managed by the authorities. As a result, the number of signatories was unconvincing for the public and discrediting for the idea. One more comparatively prominent online action was a remixed and redubbed version of the animated movie *Shrek* satirizing the referendum. It was uploaded to YouTube by an anonymous user, who has never uploaded anything else since. The clip was viewed 1,847 times; only three comments were left.

Support for a referendum was significant and parliament unanimously urged the president to introduce the necessary amendments in the constitution and set a date for the referendum. Although there was no visible protest within the country, international partners were exceptionally critical about the plan by the 2010 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) chair country to cancel elections. This forced the government to abandon the idea. The Constitutional Council, to which Nazarbayev had sent the referendum bill after the parliament overpowered his veto, found it

illegal. The president agreed and suggested that elections be held. Constitutional amendments allowing the incumbent to announce early elections and a separate law to determine that early presidential elections must be held within two months after the announcement were hastily adopted in just two days. On 4 February, Nazarbayev scheduled the elections for 3 April, leaving virtually no space for election campaigning. The opposition was clearly unprepared. "Azat" conditioned its participation with unrealistic demands for the liberalisation of legislation, and stated it would tour the country and monitor elections. No newsworthy actions followed these promises.

The registered candidates who were allowed to run for the presidency included Nursultan Nazarbayev, Zhambyl Akhmetbekov of the Communist People's Party, Ghani Kassymov of the Patriots Party and green activist Mels Yeleussizov. The parties of Akhmetbekov and Kassymov are trying to position themselves as a sort of opposition, but in fact both are phantom organisations, designed to be satellites of the ruling party. There is no political party behind Yeleussizov, who heads the Environmentalist Union "Tabigat", which does not usually get involved in politics. Kassymov and Yeleussizov had already been presidential candidates in 1999 and 2005 respectively. It was, as a result, widely believed that all candidates in the 2011 elections, except the incumbent president, were booked to act as supporting characters for Nazarbayev's re-election.

The way candidates ran their campaigns supported this assumption. Nazarbayev publicly refused to get involved in campaigning. His competitors sufficed with several paid-for and free (i.e. guaranteed by the election law) publications and TV appearances and some outdoor ads. The campaign was covered very quietly in the media, with no ads aired on TV. In this regard, what appeared to be a sudden desire by the candidates to use social media in their campaigns was not a deliberate intent to reach out for prospective supporters, but seen as a cost-saving way to make it appear as if pre-election agitation was taking place.

Akhmetbekov publicly announced[7] that he would aggressively use new media for self-promotion, but his representation in social networks was the weakest one of all. None of the candidates launched a blog as a more solid and consistent communication medium, and none of them used

5   www.elbasy.net
6   www.onlinepetition.ru/ref2010/petition.html

7   Kazakhstan Today (2011) КНПК намерена использовать для агитации социальные сети (KNPK intends to use social networks for agitation), 3 March. www.kt.kz/?lang=rus&uin=11331 68488&chapter=1153533938

Twitter. Clearly there was not much they could have written about on these platforms. Facebook was the main campaigning channel used, which basically came down to a "friending" of random users. The Facebook pages failed to provide information on political agendas, to deliver emotional messages to the readers, or even respond to the comments on their pages, which were abandoned immediately after the elections.

There were two noteworthy web-based movements addressing the issue of participation. One of them pushed for voters to take part in the elections in an unconventional way. Alisher Yelikbayev, one of Kazakhstan's top bloggers, backed the call for participation, but since there was effectively no choice to be made between the candidates – and no option to vote "against all" candidates, as had been possible with previous ballot papers – he thought voters should spoil the ballot.[8] His rationale for doing so was that, on the one hand, this would show people's readiness to vote if there were normal elections, and, on the other hand, the action would use up ballot papers so that they could not be used for fraud and ballot-stuffing.

On the opposite side was a call to boycott the elections, a campaign championed by "Alga", both online and offline. As party chairman Vladimir Kozlov said, its idea was "to boycott the elections that had been discredited."[9] The movement's online front included the creation of dedicated groups and communities on social networking sites. Project coordinators set up pages on numerous social networks, including Facebook and the Russian-based MoiMir and Vkontakte. This multiple online presence was probably a failure, as even the most popular communities had few members (around 400 or less), with members signing on to more than one group. The campaign was accompanied by videos, which included computer graphics, satirically remixed popular movies and other content advocating for the boycott. "Alga's" channel on YouTube has 138 subscribers, several of them accounts set up by the party's regional branches. The most popular video of the whole campaign, redubbed *Lord of the Rings* footage, gathered 4,300 views. The only evidence of the campaign's impact was the CEC chair's remark that it was "destructive, provocative and insulting for voters."[10] This response, however, was more likely caused by comments in the party's traditional media, and the distribution of printed leaflets.

Preliminary results of the elections were announced on the day after voting, and the day after that the final results were made public. According to the official data, voter turnout was 89.98%. The incumbent president reportedly received 95.55% of the votes.[11]

Conclusions

Disillusionment with politics, coupled with the relative well-being of the population, makes it a challenging task for any activist to campaign, especially on the web, given that access is currently not affordable to many in Kazakhstan. In this regard, it is hard to measure the effectiveness of the campaigns held during the 2011 presidential elections. The fact that elections were neither free nor fair depreciates official data on turnout and voter numbers, further complicating attempts to trace campaign results. The boycott campaign was even harder to measure, as many people – despite the official reports of high voter turnout – opted to stay at home not because they supported the cause, but due to a general lack of interest and absence of political struggle.

Politicians who took up social networking on the eve of the elections were following a fashion, but showed little expertise and commitment in running their accounts on the social networking sites. Moreover, the candidates were not actually opposing each other or the incumbent, so it is quite natural that people showed little or no interest in their campaigns.

Few members of the established opposition – although typically excluded in traditional media coverage – showed a desire to seek new media tools to get their messages across. Awkward attempts to employ online media tools ended up with the uncreative duplication of traditional communication methods that appeared not to appeal to an online audience. There is no understanding that social media bear the potential to recruit new, younger members and sympathisers.

At the same time, it needs to be said that new media are starting to penetrate political life and, notably, government officials are taking the lead in setting up online channels in an attempt to get in touch with the population. For instance, some members of parliament and public figures have actively taken to social networks, but tend to

8   Interview with Alisher Yelikbayev (Almaty), 10 May 2011.

9   Interview with Vladimir Kozlov (Almaty), 10 May 2011.

10 Novosti-Kazakhstan (2011) ЦИК призывает граждан не поддаваться призывам бойкотировать выборы. ИА Новости-Казахстан (CEC urges citizens not to follow the calls for boycott of elections), 16 March. www.newskaz.ru/politics/20110316/1242461.html

11 Tengri News (2011) Нурсултан Назарбаев набрал 95,55% голосов на выборах президента Казахстана (Nursultan Nazarbayev won 95.55% of the votes in the Kazakhstan presidential elections), 5 April. tengrinews.kz/vibori/183437

avoid expression of a principled stand or coverage of sensitive issues. At the same time, not all of them respond to comments or get involved in discussions, making many of them again a case of one-way communication. Still, the prime minister's Twitter account is often cited in the news.

There are areas in which social media have repeatedly made a difference. Most importantly, this has been the case when it comes to awareness campaigns (which have included the dissemination of crucial information not covered or insufficiently covered by the mainstream media), and charity campaigns. Experts believe that the efficacy of the latter is explained by the people's readiness for immediate action towards the good, involving no interaction with the authorities. The dead-end nature of political participation in the country rarely produces civil action, except in the expression of virtual sympathy online.

Action steps

- Advocate for the general affordability of access to the internet.

- Promote the computer literacy of the population.

- Encourage the use of social networking websites that have activism-ready functionality, rather than entertainment-centred architecture.

- Train political activists, civil society and opinion leaders on the basics of online communication, starting with Skype (since it offers easy collaborative communication). They also need to be trained on the effective use of social media with the focus on building trust and sustainable communication channels, dedicated and responsible communication practices, and incorporating multimedia into their work.

- Training should be supplemented by reviews of the best innovative communications practices and seminars that encourage creativity in order to avoid the mechanical copying of learned methods.

- Awareness, advocacy or promotional campaigns staged online should be tools for action (preferably offline action).

- New media should be used to raise international awareness and to keep foreign stakeholders (NGOs, media, politicians, etc.) informed.

- Recruiting virtual followers on social networking sites should not be random, but based on an analysis of users. Interventions should be targeted at specific groups and communities, etc.

- Learn by doing; evaluate activities; distinguish between the reasons for error and success. ▪

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

Everyone is familiar with the stories of Egypt and Tunisia. **GISWATCH** authors tell these and other lesser-known stories from more than 60 countries. Stories about:

PRISON CONDITIONS IN ARGENTINA Prisoners are using the internet to protest living conditions and demand respect for their rights.

TORTURE IN INDONESIA The torture of two West Papuan farmers was recorded on a mobile phone and leaked to the internet. The video spread to well-known human rights sites sparking public outrage and a formal investigation by the authorities.

THE TSUNAMI IN JAPAN Citizens used social media to share actionable information during the devastating tsunami, and in the aftermath online discussions contradicted misleading reports coming from state authorities.

GISWATCH also includes thematic reports and an introduction from Frank La Rue, UN special rapporteur.

GISWATCH 2011 is the fifth in a series of yearly reports that critically cover the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GISWATCH is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH
2011 Report
www.GISWatch.org