



Kazakhstan Should be Democratic Leader

Lorne Craner , Assistant Secretary

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QUESTION: Do you specialize only on the Central Asian region?

CRANER: I have responsibilities for the world. And I did not expect to spend much time in Central Asia when I started the job, but [human rights] has become a very important issue here because of the renewed relationship we have as a result of September 11. It has given us the opportunity to have a much broader relationship with many countries in this region.

Q: Please provide your assessment of the development of democracy and civil society and democratic freedoms in Kazakhstan -- maybe as compared to a few years ago.

CRANER: I think that there is a lot of development still needed here in Kazakhstan in terms of democracy and also in terms of human rights. Clearly, Kazakhstan had a very difficult situation as a [former] part of the Soviet Union in terms of having experience with those issues.

But we know that there are other countries that suffered the same fate for many years that are quickly developing those institutions mentioned. Kazakhstan is the largest nation in this region. It's the wealthiest nation in this region. It should be leading on these issues. And we would like to see it leading on these issues.

Q: And what is Kazakhstan's position in the region?

CRANER: I don't like to compare country to country, but within Kazakhstan there is obviously great development needed in terms of elections. The quality of elections here is not very high, the ability of political parties to operate -- something my colleague [Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs] Beth Jones talked about -- and the ability of the media here to operate.

I should emphasize democracy is not just about elections, although we would like to see development of better elections here in Kazakhstan. That's part of what we're talking about here concerning the election law, which does not yet comply with the standards of the OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe].

But it's also important between elections that NGOs are free to operate without harassment, in particular that the media is allowed to operate without harassment, and that there be a court system to which people have access in their ordinary life, but also for the commercial and economic health of the country.

It's important for businesses to know when they enter a country that they will have access to an impartial judicial system, and that's another area in Kazakhstan that needs work.

Q: What is your opinion on an ideal civil society and ideal elections, and what are the discrepancies in our country from the ideal?

CRANER: I should emphasize in the beginning that these are not American standards. We don't hold people to American standards on this, that or the other. And indeed in my country we can make improvements, as you saw in the last election.

But Kazakhstan has chosen to join the OSCE, which is an organization with over four dozen member states that have come together to describe standards for themselves to which they hope their members will adhere to.

In the area of election law, for example, this law needs work to come up to those standards. Really, across the board, there are many provisions that need great improvement. In particular the capabilities of the commissions that actually run the election, in the freedom for observers to observe elections, and other areas that are most important to the conduct of elections.

In terms of civil society again, the media need to be able to operate freely without harassment. There are now 120 countries around the world that can be described as democratic that have functionally democratic institutions. Three decades ago, there were maybe three dozen that could be so described. If Kazakhstan wants to join that wave of democracy that is being pursued around the world, it needs to make improvements in this area.

Q: Mr. Craner recently a new party "Asar" appeared, if you heard about it, it would be interesting to know your opinion. What can this party change? What is your political prognosis for Kazakhstan after the establishment of this party?

CRANER: I think that it's not so important that a particular political party is established. I think what is important is that a variety of parties be established. And that their leaders be free to campaign.

After September 11, part of the reason we think this is important is so that people have an outlet for their beliefs, and that they not become frustrated by believing that they have no input into the governing process. So allowing one party to operate freely or two parties to operate freely is not sufficient. There needs to be a variety of political parties that are free to campaign and free to win.

All of the citizens of the country need to believe that their thoughts have an outlet in a non-violent fashion. If that happens then democracy can begin to develop well here in Kazakhstan.

Q: You still didn't answer the question about the level of democracy in Kazakhstan in comparison to previous years. What is your perspective on current democratic development? Are we moving forward developing democracy or backwards?

CRANER: I think there was a lot of forward movement in the early 1990s. I think there was opportunity after that that was not taken. And in many ways I see it not moving forward right now. I know that there was an NGO law that had many restrictive provisions that was dropped, and it is a good thing that it was at least dropped. And it is better to have no law than a bad law on NGOs, but there is no reason that Kazakhstan cannot have a good law on NGOs.

There are also good media laws around the world in many of the 120 democratic nations I described. Kazakhstan has had the opportunity to produce one with the help of the OSCE and has been unable to do that. And at this point it has a not very good media law. Again at this point, it would probably be better just to drop it than to have a bad media law, but there's no reason Kazakhstan cannot have a good law.

Beyond that you have an election law that has many provisions that are inconsistent with OSCE standards. There's no reason Kazakhstan cannot produce a good election law. Many of the 120 democracies around the world have done so. There's no reason it can't be consistent with OSCE standards. And that's something we are going to be addressing with the government, the inability to do that.

Q: Are you talking about the current media law or the draft?

CRANER: The proposed. The draft.

Q: So what are the provisions that can make the situation for the media [better]?

CRANER: I think when the media is allowed to freely talk without possibility of harassment, where the media is allowed to seek advertisement to sustain itself, where the media is allowed to criticize people in power. In many countries that happens everyday, it happens to me, it happens to the Secretary of State, again that is true in over 100 democracies around the world.

Q: (Inaudible)

A: In my experience here in Kazakhstan people are very, very bright, they are very well educated, and if they offer opinions that are not valid, they will be able to sort them out [among themselves]. You don't need a government to be able, through a media law, to try to restrict the media opinions people offer, in the belief that they need help to decide what is good for them. You have to trust people to be able to sort that out. I think the people in Kazakhstan are smart enough to be able to do it for themselves.

Q: Is the new draft media law better or worse than the previous one?

CRANER: In some ways it is somewhat better, but this again is a law where the OSCE has offered opinions drawn from the experiences of over four dozen member countries, and the law will benefit greatly by trying to bring it up to those standards. The current media law is obviously insufficient, given the number of outlets that have been shut down in this country over the past four years and the need people feel to censor themselves and in some cases just to leave the country.

A freer media law would not only lead to freer politics, but I think it would help economically in this country. Enabling people to make investment decisions, economic decisions on their own because they feel that they have a variety of good information. And again when there is bad information they will be able to sort it out for themselves.

Q: In Kazakhstan there is such a dialogue between the government and the political parties or the public in the Permanent Committee on Democratization in the country when various political parties and government representative get together with NGOs and discuss various issues. I don't remember exactly the other organization, but it is some sort of meeting held with NGOs on a regular basis. Do you think this is the effective mechanism or tool?

CRANER: I think it is always a good thing when government gets together with political parties, or government gets together with NGOs, but that in itself is not sufficient to produce democracy. If you have people who like to form political parties [being limited] under restrictions on forming them that are very, very high, you don't have a variety of political interests represented. And if you have people who have formed NGOs but problems are found with their taxes so the NGOs don't exist, in any country that is not a good thing because again, people don't have an outlet for the beliefs and their thoughts.

So having a dialogue with them is great, but added to that is the ability of people to form a political party or form an NGO that is the best. Again, that is drawing from the experience of dozens of democracies, emergent democracies around the world.

Q: Thank you. Again, who will you meet with in Astana, and what will be the focus of those meetings?

CRANER: I'm traveling here with Beth Jones who is the Assistant Secretary for this area, Europe and Eurasia, so we will be addressing a variety of bilateral issues together from the war on terror to commercial issues to issues on human rights and democracy. We have the same meetings with the Prime Minister, the Acting Foreign Minister, the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Information, the Minister of State, and the Director of the Presidential Administration. I also have had the opportunity today to meet with members of civil society and with members of US groups that are offering assistance throughout Kazakhstan to get a sense of what they're seeing as well as what the government sees. And then we leave the next day for Tajikistan and then finally on the weekend to Kyrgyzstan.

Q: Have you had meetings with political parties?

CRANER: We met with a number of members of political parties.

Q: So what's your impression about the meeting?

CRANER: My impression is that they would like to see greater freedom here in Kazakhstan, that they think and their members think that Kazakhstan and citizens in Kazakhstan are ready to take on their responsibilities. That they would like the opportunity to compete freely in elections and to win the election, and they think that are improvements that can be made here.

Q: Thank you.

CRANER: Thank you very much.

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