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A Tale of Two Kazakhstans: Sources of Political Cleavage and Conflict in the Post-Soviet Period

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A Tale of Two Kazakhstans: Sources of Political Cleavage and Conflict in the Post-Soviet Period

BARBARA JUNISBAI

Abstract

Departing from some prominent scholarship on Kazakhstani politics, the author argues that competition between financial–industrial groups over scarce economic and political resources—rather than inter-clan or centre–periphery rivalries—largely determines who gets what, when and how. While clan politics and regional grievances may still influence struggles over the distribution of power and wealth, their importance has diminished in recent years. Instead, observable political conflict has centred around competing financial–industrial groups, which represent the diverse, and at times clashing, interests of Kazakhstan’s business and political elites.

A GROWING NUMBER OF SCHOLARS HAVE PROVIDED COMPELLING, well-researched and theory-embedded answers to the question of what drives politics in Kazakhstan. In other words, what factors determine who gets what, when and how (Lasswell 1936)? The ‘who’ question has been of particular interest: what kinds of actors are engaged in the struggle over scarce goods? How do we characterise these actors? And how do they affect political outcomes? The diversity of methods and research designs that have been undertaken to answer these questions is impressive, as are the innovative sources of data that have been gathered. This is no small feat, given the rumours, speculation and back-room deals surrounding political and economic decision-making at the highest levels of government.

Prior research highlights, among a number of social identities and actors, two types of cleavages that have shaped political outcomes in Kazakhstan. According to one

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view, long-standing clan identities rooted in kinship and ‘blood’, even if evolving in response to government policy over time, are of primary consideration when it comes to determining who gains access to desirable political and economic resources. Clan leaders vie with one another for formal and informal positions of power and use these positions to benefit their kin, often (but not always) to the exclusion of other clans. The second view holds that political conflict involves two distinct groups: regional elites in the periphery and central elites located in the capital. Below a seemingly calm surface in which the centre gives commands that the regional governments appear to dutifully execute, leaders in the periphery are increasingly following their own agendas, which are often at odds with the interests of the centre. Because both approaches concern the political salience of both pre-Soviet and Soviet-created identities, they can be collapsed into a single category called ‘historical cleavages’. By historical, I mean that these cleavages developed prior to or under Soviet rule, rather than during the post-Soviet period.

An alternative view suggests that there is another, more recent force driving politics in Kazakhstan. While clan affiliation and the ambitions of regional leaders have been shown to influence how power and wealth are allocated, it is argued here that these are no longer the primary fault lines around which political conflict is structured. Instead, in recent years, fissures—with observable repercussions—have formed between rival financial–industrial groups (*finansovo-promyshlennye gruppy* or FPGs), which represent the business interests of key economic and political elites.¹ Significantly, cleavages based on clan affiliation and regional identity do not account for membership in or conflict among FPGs. The view that political conflict is in large part the result of economic conflict between financial–industrial groups is, moreover, widely held by Kazakhstani political actors and observers.

FPGs closely associated with the president have gained control over the country’s oil and gas sectors, as well as other highly sought-after natural resources. They comprise the president’s inner circle, or the ‘Nazarbaev clan’, as it is sometimes called. Membership in the inner circle is not limited to the president’s extended family or to those sharing the same clan or tribal identity. In addition to the inner circle are other financial–industrial groups, which make up the second tier or outer circle. While permitted to engage in business and amass great wealth, they have nonetheless been denied entry into the most lucrative sectors of the economy. Most of those in the second tier have no desire to be pulled into political conflict and remain neutral. Indeed, elites in general shy away from political activity that could potentially harm their economic interests (Bellin 2000). Others, however, have chafed under Kazakhstan’s two-tiered system of rewards and have fought for political guarantees that would allow them to compete with those close to the president. Within the inner circle, as well, groups compete with one another for access to resources and influence.

We are thus faced with a tale of two Kazakhstans. On the one hand is a tale of historical cleavages, of clan politics—at times adversarial and at times accommodating—and of competition between the centre and the periphery. On the other hand is a tale of competing financial–industrial groups, existing within a highly personalised

¹Elites are defined as those who indirectly or directly play a regular and substantial part in national political outcomes, such as political, government and economic actors (Higley & Burton 1989; Mosca 1939; Pareto 1935, 1966; Putnam 1976).

system of resource allocation. Both versions assume that the players' main goal is to gain access to desirable political and economic resources and to influence decisions regarding who gets what, when and how.

To further explore these rival tales, the article is organised as follows. The next section reviews and offers a critique of the main arguments and findings of approaches that focus on historical cleavages to understand politics in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. The following section takes a closer look at the alternative tale of competing financial–industrial groups. Thereafter, evidence is provided as to why the influences of clan and region are not as important as has been suggested. The article concludes with thoughts about the meaning of clan in Kazakhstan, the debate over presidential strength or weakness, and the potential unfolding of politics after Nazarbaev.

A tale of historical cleavages: inter-clan rivalry and centre–periphery competition

Although conceptually distinct, in everyday discourse the lines between clan and region are blurred. Regional affiliation (the geographical area or province from which one or one's family hails) often coincides with clan or tribal affiliation, and a person's region of origin frequently serves as a marker of his or her belonging to a particular kinship group. For many Kazakhs, as for Central Asians generally, identity-based social networks remain vital because of their ability to meet members' basic needs (such as helping find employment or material assistance), as well as to fulfil less tangible aspirations (such as laying claim to a grand heritage of clan or regional myths, heroes and cultural distinctiveness). Clan and region, furthermore, are useful shortcuts or heuristic devices for making quick judgments about an unfamiliar person's character and trustworthiness.

Beyond these commonalities, clan and regional identities share an additional feature. Both can be described as historical sociopolitical cleavages. As is well known and has been described in detail elsewhere (Collins 2002; Khlyupin 1998), the division of Kazakhs into clans and tribes dates back to Central Asia's pre-Soviet history, and such divisions have survived despite official attempts to obscure or eradicate them. Regionalism, which manifests itself in competing claims by the centre and periphery, was born out of political–territorial identities that flourished during the Soviet period, especially under Brezhnev. The term 'historical cleavage' is intended only to emphasise that clan and regional identities first emerged as Soviet and pre-Soviet traditions and does not in any way imply that they are archaic, primordial or unchanging in nature. Quite the opposite, clan and region, as sources of self-identification and inter-group differentiation among Kazakhs, have evolved in response to objective conditions and government policy. Moreover, both cleavages have been described as pre-existing forms of political organisation that continue to influence how resources and power are allocated in post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

The clan politics approach

Methodologically and theoretically diverse, studies of clan politics in Central Asia start from a common premise: lineage-based patronage networks that link individuals vertically (from elites to commoners and commoners to elites) and horizontally (elite-to-elite and commoner-to-commoner) play a significant role in politics. Clans are

described as competing with one another and with the state for control over economic and political goods. Their continuing salience is the result of individuals responding rationally to state-led nation building programmes, to conditions of economic scarcity, and to a lack of alternative routes to political and economic power. At the same time, studies of clan politics also find that the ability of clans to affect political outcomes varies. Depending upon economic performance, state actions, government policies and how formal institutions are crafted, clan politics can be activated or fall dormant.

As those investigating clan politics have demonstrated, clans are not static, unmodified holdovers from a pre-Soviet past. Schatz (2000), for example, argues that the increasing centrality of clan affiliation for Kazakhs at the individual level is in part the unintended result of the government's policy encouraging the development of a Kazakh national identity. Far from uniting Kazakhs, efforts to rediscover Kazakh history, traditions and language have accentuated sub-national differences, in particular those based on clan and tribal identities. While clan identity is gaining in importance for ordinary Kazakhs, however, Schatz's analysis of politics at the elite level reports mixed results (2004, 2005). On the one hand, the clan (called *zhuz* or horde) to which President Nazarbaev belongs and to which many of his key political appointees have belonged, dominates national politics 'at the top' (Schatz 2004, p. 99).² Yet, this dominance is not absolute, as the president has followed a policy of clan balancing which involves the inclusion of representatives of other clans in official positions of power.

Collins's (2006) book-length treatment of clan politics similarly concludes that inter-clan conflict is less pervasive in Kazakhstan, especially when compared to the rest of Central Asia. While Schatz's findings suggest that clan conflict is muted by the president's policy of clan balancing at lower levels of government, Collins explains that clan politics 'is much more limited and controlled in this case, as a result of [Kazakhstan's] economic prosperity' (2006, p. 6). Because one of the functions of clans is to increase their members' ability to acquire scarce resources under difficult economic conditions, during periods of economic growth and prosperity, the political significance of clans may wane. Clans thus may be stronger or more active forces in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, whose populations are impoverished and whose economies are in decline, stagnant or expanding at a very slow pace. The boom in Kazakhstan's energy, banking, real estate and construction sectors has in recent years transformed the country into an economic powerhouse, attracting tens of thousands of migrant workers from neighbouring countries. This prosperity, Collins argues, is what makes clan politics less vibrant in Kazakhstan.

At the same time, in Collins's earlier works (2002, 2003, 2004), clans in Kazakhstan, as they are throughout Central Asia, are described as 'the primary source of political and economic power' (2004, p. 226). Clans have taken over the functions of a state hindered by economic scarcity, lack of resources, and weak formal institutions. 'Acting informally', Collins explains, 'competing clans ... divide the central state's offices and resources among themselves' (2002, p. 143), and not even energy-rich Kazakhstan is '... immune to clan politics' (2004, p. 260). Based on these passages, Collins conceives of clans as adversaries of or competitors to the state. Schatz (2005),

²Nazarbaev belongs to the senior horde. Kazakhs are traditionally grouped into three hordes: the senior (or elder) horde, the middle horde and the junior (or younger) horde.

on the other hand, argues that clans are not necessarily pitted against the state. This is because the animosity between clans and the state may be overcome by means of clan balancing. When clan balancing is successfully accomplished, no single clan dominates others, and overt clan conflict is averted. Thus, Schatz contends, we cannot infer from the lack of observable conflict or clear domination of a particular clan that clans play no role in the distribution of public and private resources. Quite the opposite, clan politics can be underway even when its effects are not clearly visible.

The above summary of the works of Schatz and Collins draws attention to the main shortcoming of the clan approach to understanding Kazakhstani politics. Studies in this vein have not yet been able to tease out the mechanisms that clearly link clans to political outcomes (Radnitz 2007). It may be true, as Schatz argues, that the absence of overt clan conflict cannot be taken as proof that clans play no role in politics at all or do so only at the margins. However, without observable outcomes that can be connected together to tell a causal tale, we are left with no measures by which to judge the importance of clans relative to other factors. As Schatz notes, 'Clan politics was behind-the-scenes; relationships were opaque' (2004, p. 122). Elsewhere he explains: 'Although I have tried to count them, clans are among those political phenomena that are hard to quantify. They are concealable, often invisible, private, and . . . hotly contested' (p. 109). These qualifications not only point to the problem of empirically documenting clans and their direct political significance, but they also cast doubt on the claim that clans are indeed the central actors in Kazakhstani politics.³ For, although clans as social organisations can and do play a role in Kazakhstan's internal political struggles, this role is neither definitive (Cummings 2005) nor constant (Schatz 2005).⁴

As evidence of clan politics, Schatz and Collins both cite President Nazarbaev's preferential treatment for his family members, in particular the placement of one of his daughters and two of his sons-in-law in key political and economic positions. And, as evidence of inter-clan conflict in relatively wealthy Kazakhstan, Collins notes that 'rival factions resent the Nazarbaev clan's usurpation of most major state assets' (2006, p. 301) and 'want their share of foreign investment and energy wealth, which has been diverted disproportionately to Nazarbaev's clan' (2004, p. 257). Yet, to make the link from clan affiliation to clan conflict requires more evidence than heightened economic and political struggle in Kazakhstan between rival groups. It would require documentation that competitors to the 'Nazarbaev clan' are acting as representatives of kinship-based groups, as opposed to some other kind of social, political or economic organisation. One would also have to demonstrate that non-elite clan members recognise the elite rivals to Nazarbaev not only as their kin (real or fictive), but also as their particular clan's leaders.

The centre-periphery approach

The focus of this approach is essentially the ' . . . geographically-based struggle between state elites for control over access to both public and private resources' (Jones Luong

³Unlike Collins, Schatz does not argue that clan conflict is the primary force behind political outcomes. Schatz does, however, argue that clans 'matter' and suggests that clans have a significant impact on political life. See Schatz (2004), especially pp. 109–12.

⁴For a recent example of clan-based grievances, see Kyrbasov (2007).

2004, p. 184). As Jones Luong (2002, p. 52) summarises it, '[R]egionalism—that is, identities based on the internal administrative-territorial divisions established under the Soviet regime—has emerged as the most salient political cleavage' in post-Soviet Central Asia. Research on the political consequences of regionalism emphasises the ongoing struggle between elites at the periphery and those in the political centre over resources and influence.⁵ The term 'periphery' and the related phrase 'regional actors' generally refer to *oblast'* administration heads (called *akims*) or the officials under their charge, while the 'centre' is equated with the head of the central government, namely, the president and his administration.⁶

Soviet policies, including the creation of administrative units to coincide with pre-existing sub-ethnic groups, inadvertently imbued regional identity with political meaning. State actions thus unintentionally fostered the emergence of regionalism as 'the lens through which elites viewed politics' (Jones Luong 2002, pp. 53, 63–74). Importantly, in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, regionalism threatens the centre's ability to maintain control over the periphery. According to Jones Luong,

the regional governments have posed the most serious challenge to the central state's authority both under Soviet rule and after independence. The Soviet system is responsible for creating the very local strongmen that the central government must now either co-opt or defeat in order to establish its control over the periphery. (2004, p. 208)

President Nazarbaev thus faces serious long-term threats from regional leaders who merely appear—especially to Western observers—to be under the president's complete control. The reality is that elites in the periphery are gaining the economic and political upper hand to (in)directly challenge the centre's control over policy implementation. Jones Luong (2004) and Cummings (2000) argue that, despite Kazakhstan's official status as a unitary state with an increasingly centralised system of government, the ability of the centre to control outcomes in the regions is hampered by *de facto* decentralisation, or decentralisation by default. Both authors stress the role of foreign investment in Kazakhstan's resource-rich *oblasti*, located in the north, west and eastern parts of the country, in granting regional elites greater autonomy.

In contrast to the independence of regional leaders, the authority and capacity of the central government has been greatly undermined, especially relative to the Soviet period. Among other factors, Cummings (2000) points to the loss of transfers from the Soviet Union and Russia as a key reason for the centre's weakness and inability to enforce policy. Jones Luong likewise attributes the centre's weakness relative to the periphery to a general, although underspecified, condition of 'a shrinking state since independence' (2004, p. 208). As state coffers become depleted, access to Soviet-era revenues are cut off and fiscal difficulties continue, the centre finds itself increasingly weakened relative to a resource-rich and investment-rich periphery. In effect, the

⁵As is true of the literature on clan politics, the research questions and approaches guiding studies of centre-periphery relations are diverse, as are their findings. Despite any divergence or disagreement among the authors, I include them under a common approach because they investigate and extrapolate upon the state of power relations between the regions and the centre.

⁶Kazakhstan is divided into 14 administrative units, called *oblasti*. Each *oblast'* is headed by an *akim* (governor), who is directly appointed by the president.

centre appears impoverished and constrained, while the regions are emboldened by new resources and opportunities for autonomous action.

One criticism of the picture painted above is that it focuses on the benefits from foreign investment that accrue to the periphery, without pausing to examine plausible positive effects on the centre. Foreign investment appears to further autonomy at the periphery by providing *akims* with independent resources and leverage over the central government, while creating only obstacles for and formidable rivals (what Jones Luong terms 'local strongmen') to the centre. Yet, extensive foreign investment streaming into the country may also serve to bolster the central government in crucial ways. Investment may provide the central government with resources to augment the coercive and fiscal capacities necessary to deal with internal and external threats, thereby increasing its strength relative to rivals at the periphery. By creating new jobs and adding to the funds budgeted for government social programmes, investment might also improve the standard of living of key segments of the population. This, in turn, could raise the central government's popular legitimacy among both Kazakhs and Russians, Kazakhstan's two largest ethnic groups.⁷ Thus, while foreign investment may have provided regional leaders with leverage against the centre, it may have also provided the centre with its own counterbalancing resources.

In addition, this approach underestimates the centre's capacity for reining in regional actors in a relatively short period of time, as well as overestimates regional elites' capacities and incentives to challenge the centre. It also ignores the possibility that the political situation can quickly and radically change from one in which the centre seems 'weak', but then unexpectedly appears 'strong' and vice versa. State strength and state weakness are, after all, difficult to assess in absolute terms, although some scholars characterise all under-institutionalised and personalised regimes as weak (Migdal 1988). One should, in addition, recall a key point made by Olson (1990), namely, that 'strength' and 'weakness' are based as much on objective conditions as they are on subjective perceptions, held both by elite actors and the general population, which can be altered quite unexpectedly.

An alternative tale: competing financial-industrial groups

If politics is the process of determining who gets what, when and how, then political conflict can be defined as the struggle or competition among influential actors over how power and resources are distributed. Because Kazakhstani politics is overwhelmingly an elite affair, political conflict is difficult to measure. In this article, the analysis is restricted to observed cases in which behind-the-scenes quarrels among elites over resource allocation has spilled over into the public realm and has been documented in the domestic mass media and discussed by domestic political observers. I acknowledge that there are likely to be numerous other examples that remain hidden

⁷According to the leader of a Russian cultural centre, which represents ethnic Russians residing in Kazakhstan under the International Council of Russians Abroad, a majority of Russians support President Nazarbaev precisely because of the economic and political stability he has brought the country. Author's interview with anonymous civil society activist, 13 March 2007, Almaty.

from view and inaccessible to outsiders. Such cases are, as a consequence, beyond the scope of this article.

Interviews with politicians in government and in the opposition, political analysts, journalists, scholars and NGO representatives conducted in Almaty and Astana during spring 2007 indicate that the main lines of political conflict are not between regional elites fighting off the claims and policy decisions of the centre.⁸ Neither are they associated with clan leaders battling for a piece of the economic pie. While inter-clan competition and the competition between the periphery and the centre may have been accurate accounts of Kazakhstan's political cleavages during the early years of independence, neither divide has erupted into open confrontation. As we will see in this section, observable political conflict has emerged along a very different axis than either of the approaches focusing on historical cleavages suggests.

The influential actors in Kazakhstan's politics and big business are financial-industrial groups, or FPGs, which Kazakhstani and Russian political analysts characterise as a type of interest group.⁹ Wealthy and powerful political and business elites associated with various FPGs occupy high-ranking posts in the government; they own, head or control a variety of industrial, financial, trade, media and other enterprises (Ashimbaev 2007; Khlyupin 1998; Kjænet *et al.* 2008; Satpaev 2006a).¹⁰ The role of FPGs in Kazakhstan's political system is the consequence of a number of factors. Political parties and NGOs are underdeveloped, have few active members in the electorate, and lack the capacity or clout to have an impact on major government policy.¹¹ There are no independent unions, and the national union (called Atameken) is closely associated with the state. In addition, alternative routes for gaining influence through elected political office are severely limited. Without popularly elected *akims* and without free and fair local elections, there are few democratic channels for ambitious local leaders to work their way up to the national elite.¹² FPGs can thus be conceived of as substitutes for the kinds of political actors and organisations found in other contexts (Hale 2005) or as filling the vacuum created by the lack of comparable players in politics and the economy (Bekturganova 2007).

Inaccessible and non-transparent, FPGs reflect the secretive and closed nature of Kazakhstan's politics. As with political intermediaries in developed democracies (parties, interest groups, non-governmental organisations, unions and lobbies), FPGs seek to maximise access to political and economic resources and to influence

⁸See the Appendix for a description of the methodology, interview questions and types of individuals questioned.

⁹While Cummings (2000) analyses Kazakhstan's center-periphery relations, Cummings (2005) shows how, in addition to the regional dimension, family and business interests have also shaped the contemporary elite. In Cummings (2005), financial-industrial groups are referred to as 'state economic groups'. Among Kazakhstani political observers, FPGs have also been called influence or pressure groups (*gruppy vliyaniye*) and, simply, groupings (*gruppировки*). I refrain from referring to FPGs as business clans (or 'klans') that represent corporate or strategic interests to avoid confusion with the anthropological (or kinship-based) definition of clan.

¹⁰See also Dilevskaya (2001) and Institut aktual'nykh issledovaniy (1999). For a detailed account of Russia's financial-industrial groups and their political impact, see Hale (2005) and Barnes (2006).

¹¹This characterisation also applies to the *Nur Otan* presidential party, whose status, most observers agree, rests solely on its leader, President Nazarbaev.

¹²Author's interview with then *Mazhilis* deputy Serik Abdurakhmanov, 8 April 2007, Astana.

government policy in their favour. However, FPGs differ from their democratic counterparts in significant ways. They do not aggregate or express public opinion, articulate a particular political view or platform, or seek to maximise support among voters. Attempts by FPGs to influence the president often take place behind closed doors, without public knowledge. Those heading FPGs who have spent their careers in government, moreover, do not list their business holdings. Without a paper trail tracing FPGs to specific mass media outlets or private companies, the extent of their wealth and business assets is difficult to determine. At the same time, a good amount of information about FPGs has been gathered by Kazakhstani and Russian political observers and research centres and made available in newspapers, journals and on the internet.

To get a better sense of Kazakhstan's FPGs, the most visible groups are presented in Table 1, the data for which were compiled on the basis of the author's interviews and publicly available Kazakhstani and Russian print and internet sources (Adilov 2003; Aliev 2000; Ashimbaev 2008; Kharlamov 2005; Satpaev 2007).¹³ Table 1 lists the FPGs most commonly cited by Kazakhstani political observers as of 2007, the individual businesses and economic sectors in which they are involved, and whether they include the president's blood relations. Following the delineation used in some of the coverage of FPGs, Table 1 is divided into two groups: the inner circle and the second tier (Satpaev 2007).¹⁴ Table 1 is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but rather a 'snapshot' in time of the generally agreed upon major players. While several other elites have been cited as members of the inner circle, these individuals are not listed in Table 1 due to a lack of information about their business activities. They include the president's nephew, Kairat Saltybaldy; the *akim* of Astana, Imangali Tasmagambetov; Minister of Foreign Affairs Marat Tazhin; Ambassador to the Russian Federation Adilbek Dzhaksybekov; Senate Chairman Kasymzhomart Tokaev; and presidential advisor Nurlan Balgimbaev.

The inner circle is comprised of the FPGs closest to the president. Elite members in the president's inner circle have been given exclusive access to the country's lucrative energy and metals industries, as the list of enterprises in column two of Table 1 shows. Interestingly, this so-called clan is made up of both the president's family members and his close (but non-related) associates, as column three highlights. Among widely recognised members of the inner circle is Nurtai Abykaev, a long-time friend and ally of the president, known as a representative of the 'old presidential guard' (Alekhova 2006), a former speaker of parliament and former Ambassador to the Russian Federation. Others include the leadership of the Eurasia Group, Aleskandr Mashkevich, Patokh Shodiev and Alidzhan Ibragimov, and the heads of Kazakhmys (a major producer of copper and other metals), Aleksandr Kim and Aleksandr Ni. In addition to these non-kin members of the inner circle, the Aliev–Nazarbaeva FPG (headed by the president's eldest daughter, Dariga Nazarbaeva and her husband Rakhat Aliev) and the Kulibaev FPG (headed by another presidential son-in-law, Timur Kulibaev) figured prominently among the inner circle until 2007. In 2007,

¹³Additional sources include Dzhaniybekov (2004); Epitsentr evraziiskii tsentr politicheskikh issledovaniy i agentsvo sotsial'nykh tekhnologii (2005); Institut aktual'nykh issledovaniy (1999); *Profil*, 2 April 2007, available at: <http://www.profile.ru/items/?item=22527>, accessed 20 January 2008; Satov (2007); and Yuritsyn (2007).

¹⁴See also Epitsentr evraziiskii tsentr politicheskikh issledovaniy i agentsvo sotsial'nykh tekhnologii (2005) and Yuritsyn (2007).

TABLE 1
SNAPSHOT OF COMMONLY CITED FINANCIAL-INDUSTRIAL GROUPS, CIRCA 2007

<i>Name (in alphabetical order)</i>	<i>Associated with the following businesses/enterprises</i>	<i>President's relative?</i>
INNER CIRCLE		
Abykaev, Nurtai	Said to be associated with the Ispatkarmet steel producer, Kazakhmys light metals extraction company, and Petroleum Kazakhstan; said to control most government media	He may be ^a
Aliev, Rakhmat/ Nazarbaeva, Dariga ^b	Assets included Nurbank; Sakharnyi Tsentr sugar company; Neftyanoi Tsentr oil company; Mobil gas stations; series of oil refineries; <i>Novoe Pokolenie</i> and <i>Karavan</i> newspapers; <i>NTK, KTK, ORT-Kazakhstan</i> and <i>Khabar</i> television stations; <i>Europa-Plus, Hit-FM, Russkoe Radio</i> and <i>Radio Retro</i> radio stations; <i>Kazakhstan-Today</i> News Agency; <i>Alma Media; TV-Media</i> ; since summer 2007, the Aliev-Nazarbaeva FPG has lost all of its media holdings, but Nazarbaeva maintains a majority share in Nurbank	Yes
Kim, Vladimir ^c /Ni, Vladimir	Kim was on <i>Forbes</i> magazine's list of billionaires two years in a row (2006 and 2007) and in 2007 was the wealthiest person in Kazakhstan, then worth an estimated \$5.5 billion; Kim-Ni FPG owns a series of light metal mining companies, including Kazakhmys Corporation, Zhezkazgansvetmet Corporation, and East Kazakhstan Copper-Chemical Plant; <i>Vremya</i> newspaper	No
Kulibaev, Timur ^d	The combined official wealth of Dinara Kulibaeva and Timur Kulibaev in 2007 was estimated at about \$4 billion; heads Narodnyi Bank; major shareholder in Kazkommertsbank; until 2007 was vice president of the KazMunaiGas state oil company; heads series of oil-related companies, from extraction, processing, to transport, including Kaztranzoil Holding Company, Kaztranzgas, Mangystau-munaigaz, oil processing plants in Shymkent and Pavlodar; Bakhus alcohol and water bottling company; series of media holdings, including <i>NTV-Kazakhstan, Izvestiya-Kazakhstan, Kontinent</i> magazine, and the Kazakhstani editions of the <i>Komsomol'skaya Pravda</i> and <i>Izvestiya</i> newspapers; some regional airline companies	Yes
Mashkevich, Aleksandr/Shodiev, Patokh/Ibragimov, Alidzhan The Eurasia FPG	According to <i>Forbes</i> , all three were worth a little under \$2 billion each in 2007; owns the Eurasian Natural Resources Corporation (ENRC); Aluminum Kazakhstan; said to control Kazakhstan's metals, energy and coal markets; owns a series of metal and coal mines and power stations; Kazakh Mineral Resource Corporation; Eurasian Bank; the <i>Ekspress-K</i> newspaper and <i>Irbis</i> television station; had controlled the Agrarian (<i>Agrarnaya partiya Kazakhstana</i>) and Civic (<i>Grazhdanskaya partiya Kazakhstana</i>) parties until their merger with the presidential <i>Otan</i> party in 2007	No

(continued)

TABLE 1
(Continued)

Name (in alphabetical order)	Associated with the following businesses/enterprises	President's relative?
Utemuratov, Bulat ^c	<i>Forbes</i> estimated Utemuratov's net worth at \$1 billion in 2008; shareholder in Turan Alem Bank and Narodnyi Bank; former shareholder in ATF Bank; Kazzink (zinc); Kazfosfat (phosphates); said to be a former major shareholder in television <i>Channel 31</i> and owner of a series of television stations, radio stations and newspapers, including the newspaper <i>Megapolis</i> and the opposition news website <i>Navigator</i>	No
SECOND TIER		
Ablyazov, Mukhtar	President, Astana Holding (1993–1997); president, Kazakhstan Electricity Grid Operating Company (1997–1998); Minister of Energy, Industry and Trade (1998–1999); chair, board of directors, Kazakhstan Airlines (2001); chair, board of directors, Temirbank (2001–2002); chair, board of directors, Bank Turan Alem (2005–2009); said to have financed the <i>Respublika</i> and <i>Vremya PO</i> opposition newspapers and <i>Tan</i> television station; in 2009, charged with money laundering, fraud and organising a criminal group; Bank Turan Alem nationalised; Ablyazov currently in exile	No
Atamkulov, Erlan	Rakhat Kazakh–Austrian conglomerate of 29 companies, including a hotel construction company, vodka production, Arabian racehorse breeding and insurance companies (1992–2002); president, Kazakhstan Temir Zholy (2002–2007); member, board of directors, Kedentransservis company (2007–2008); member, <i>Otan</i> party's political council (2007–2008)	No
Baiseitov, Bakhytbek	<i>Forbes</i> estimates net worth in 2009 at \$1 billion; founder of and major shareholder in CenterCredit Bank; president, Association of Banks of Kazakhstan; president, Atameken financial investment group; chair, board of directors, CenterInvest investment company; member, <i>Otan</i> and <i>Nur Otan</i> political parties	No
Batalov, Raimbek	Raimbek Group (grocery products, juices, milk processing, spirits, bottled water); chairs the Forum of Entrepreneurs; member, Atameken union; member, President's Council of Entrepreneurs; <i>Nur Otan</i> party member and <i>Mazhilis</i> deputy (2007–present)	No
Seisembaev, Margulan	President, chair of board of directors, Seimar Al'yans Financial Corporation (and earlier related businesses); chair, advisory council, Al'yans Bank; member, <i>Otan</i> presidential party (2004)	No

(continued)

TABLE 1

(Continued)

<i>Name (in alphabetical order)</i>	<i>Associated with the following businesses/enterprises</i>	<i>President's relative?</i>
Subkhanberdin, Nurzhan ^f Kazkommerts FPG	Subkhanberdin's wealth in 2007 estimated at \$1.5 billion; heads Kazkommertsbank conglomerate, which includes one of Kazakhstan's top banks, Kazkommertsbank, and a series of daughter companies; said to have worked closely with the <i>Ak Zhol</i> party, headed by Alikhan Baimenov	No

Notes: ^aAccording to some sources, Abykaev, a member of the senior horde and Shapyrashty tribe like President Nazarbaev, is a distant relative of the president.

^bUntil 2001, Aliev was considered the president's right hand and a potential successor. Aliev's influence declined after 2001, the result of a confrontation with the Abyyazov FPG and evidence that Aliev was plotting against the president and had posted compromising material about the president and his family on the internet.

^cAs a result of the financial crisis, in 2008, Kim is no longer included among the world's billionaires.

^dAccording to Kharlamov (2005), Kulibaev united with the Kazkommerts FPG in 2000 and the Utemuratov FPG in 2005–2006 and worked closely with the Abyyazov FPG. Other elites said to have been associated with the Kulibaev FPG are Nurlan Kapparov, Ulan Ksembaev and Karim Masimov.

^eUtemuratov is sometimes listed as a member of the second tier.

^fKharlamov (2005) categorises the Kulibaev and Subkhanberdin FPGs as one, explaining that they united in 2000. Epitsentr (2005) places Subkhanberdin in the inner circle.

Sources: Adilov (2003), Aliev (2000), Ashimbaev (2008), Kharlamov (2005), Satpaev (2007); for additional sources, see footnote 13.

President Nazarbaev took steps to rein in his ambitious sons-in-law, including the confiscation and redistribution of assets belonging to the Aliev–Nazarbaeva FPG. These developments will be discussed in detail in the next section.

Given that FPGs in the inner circle not only compete with one another, but also enter into alliances or split apart, there have been modifications to the composition of the inner circle since the 1990s.¹⁵ The pecking order in the inner circle has been subject to change as well, as the fortunes and sway of particular elite groups over the president have waxed and waned with circumstance. There was a time, for instance, when Rakhat Aliev seemed all-powerful or when the Eurasia Group was viewed as losing its foothold in the hierarchy and the president's 'ear' in the process. Outright expulsion from the inner circle, as in the case of the Aliev–Nazarbaeva FPG, however, appears to be a rare occurrence. Movement from the inner circle to the second tier also appears to be unusual.

If the president's long-established allies and family relations constitute the inner circle, which groups make up the second tier? The nature of the economic system

¹⁵For example, Nurlan Balgimbaev was associated with the Kulibaev FPG in the late 1990s, but may have been the subject of a smear campaign in the Russian and Kazakhstani press as a result of some conflict that arose between Balgimbaev and other Kulibaev associates. Nurlan Kapparov, also mentioned as a member of the Kulibaev FPG in the late 1990s, resigned from his post as deputy minister of energy and mineral resources in 2001. After finishing graduate school at Harvard University, he served on the board of directors of a Canadian oil company operating in Kazakhstan and later co-founded a company called the Lancaster Group.

provides one answer. Kazakhstan's economy combines real and functioning elements of a free market with a set of special privileges reserved for FPGs closest to the president.¹⁶ Thanks to the president's policies encouraging economic liberalisation and privatisation, a wealthy class of independent oligarchs, business owners and entrepreneurs has been solidified since the mid-to-late 1990s. They make up the second tier—FPGs that have been allowed to amass a fortune and build up Kazakhstan's domestic economy, but have not been given access to the sectors reserved for the inner circle, such as the oil, gas and metal industries. A number of these beneficiaries of privatisation have come into direct conflict with FPGs in the inner circle over the allocation of resources. The majority of FPGs in the second tier, however, refrain from (overt or observable) political activity, preferring the safety of neutrality.¹⁷

As is true of the inner circle, the composition of the second tier has changed over time. Unlike the inner circle, however, the second tier cannot be said to have a core of long-standing members. A number of second-tier elites who were cited in earlier accounts are no longer part of Kazakhstan's political and business establishment. These include Serik Burkitbaev, Oleg Li and Dzhakshybek Kulekeev. Burkitbaev, who most recently headed KazMunaiGaz, was charged with economic crimes in 2009.¹⁸ One explanation for the shifting fortunes of second-tier FPGs is that, despite large-scale privatisation (which facilitated the rise of FPGs in the first place), decisions over who is allowed to become a player in Kazakhstan's big business are ultimately the president's prerogative. Depending on the president's will, '... this or that group can gain or lose control over certain state structures, companies, firms and even whole sectors of the economy' (Satpaev 2007, pp. 295–96).

Other second-tier FPGs have lost their businesses due to confrontation with the president and members of the inner circle. Zamanbek Nurkadilov, once considered a personal friend of President Nazarbaev, and who announced his opposition to the president in 2005, was listed among Kazakhstan's FPGs in 1999, but not in later

¹⁶As former entrepreneur and current opposition leader Asylbek Kozhakhmetov explains, Kazakhstan's economy is based on the principles of the free market only up to a point: 'We have free markets at the level of small businesses and perhaps at the level of medium-sized businesses, as well. But you can only get into high-stakes big business if you openly and constantly pronounce your loyalty to the regime' (interview with the author, 6 April 2007, Almaty). The director of a Kazakhstani media NGO agrees: 'Our economic system is harshly authoritarian at the top, when it comes to big business, but at the lower level there is competition and the laws regulating economic interactions are for the most part liberal' (author's interview with anonymous NGO leader, 17 May 2007, Almaty).

¹⁷Author's interview with an anonymous political observer who was public relations coordinator of an opposition party, 24 April 2007, Almaty.

¹⁸For more on Burkitbaev see Pannier (2008). Institut aktual'nykh issledovaniy (1999) lists Burkitbaev as a leader of the Kazkommerts group and Li as a FPG leader with apparent connections to other FPGs headed by Nurtai Abykaev (inner circle) and Nurzhan Subkhanberdin (second tier). Cummings (2005, p. 42) includes Li among Kazakhstan's six or eight state economic groups, and Aliev (2009) mentions Li once in connection with a group of three business elite members who gained control of the Pavlodar oil refinery in the late 1990s and later had a falling out with one another. Contemporary accounts, however, make no mention of Li; nor is he included in *Kto est' kto v Kazakhstane* (2006, 2008). Yuritsyn (2007) includes Dzhakshybek Kulekeev, a former minister and head of the Temir Zholy state railroad company, among the second tier. Kulekeev was arrested on corruption charges (bribe-taking) in 2008.

accounts.¹⁹ As a consequence of their participation in the establishment of the *Demokraticeskii Vybor Kazakhstana* (Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, DVK) opposition movement in late 2001, the well-known second-tier FPG leaders Bulat Abilov and Galymzhan Zhakiyanov either liquidated their assets themselves or were stripped of them. In contrast, two other heads of FPGs who were signatories to the DVK, Nurzhan Subkhanberdin and Mukhtar Ablyazov (both listed in Table 1), were permitted to retain their main holdings after pledging not to meddle in politics again.²⁰

Although Table 1 draws attention to the prominence of non-kin members in the president's inner circle, it is not meant to downplay the significance of the first family. A great deal of political conflict, in fact, has stemmed from economic conflict involving either Dariga Nazarbaeva or Rakhat Aliev and other FPG leaders, both those within the inner circle and those outside it. Initially, the president's children were not involved in either politics or business, but beginning around 1995 they came to play an increasingly dominant role in both (Kharlamov 2005; Khlyupin 1998).²¹ As will be discussed later in some detail, this influence has appeared to be weakening since 2007, when the Aliev–Nazarbaeva FPG was, in essence, dissolved and its businesses placed under the control of government ministries or handed over to other FPGs in the inner circle.

The endeavour to establish family rule in Kazakhstan was far from a smooth, uncontested process. As President Nazarbaev's children used their privileged positions to take over or shut down competitors' businesses, a well of resentment built up among second-tier FPGs. Presidential son-in-law Rakhat Aliev, for example, was well known for strong-arming his competitors into submission. Aliev gained ownership of lucrative Kazakhstani businesses by purchasing them at below-market prices or by simply taking them over (a practice known as *reiderstvo*, based on the English 'raider' or 'to raid').²² Resorting to *reiderstvo*, Aliev became the owner of the largest sugar processing enterprise in the country, earning him the nickname 'the sugar king'. As

¹⁹Institut aktual'nykh issledovaniï (1999) lists among Nurkadilov's businesses a company called Dostyk Interavto, construction companies and agricultural processing plants. Based on these assets, Nurkadilov seems to have been among the second tier FPGs, rather than in the inner circle.

²⁰Subkhanberdin remained the head of Kazkommertsbank after quickly rescinding his signature to the DVK's founding document. In retribution for his initial hard-line stance against the president, Mukhtar Ablyazov was jailed on corruption charges in 2002 and served almost a year of his six-year sentence before being pardoned and allowed to resume his business activities outside the country. A number of Ablyazov's original businesses were, however, taken over by other FPGs. Ablyazov spent two years investing outside of Kazakhstan before returning in 2005. In spring 2009, apparently as a result of the financial crisis, the government of Kazakhstan confiscated Ablyazov's remaining assets in conjunction with the nationalisation of Bank Turan Alem, a prominent Kazakhstani bank that had borrowed heavily from abroad. Facing criminal charges, Ablyazov fled Kazakhstan, as did some of his key associates and family members. Those close to Ablyazov who stayed in the country have been subject to government pressure.

²¹Author's interviews with Petr Svoik, NGO leader, former parliamentarian and minister, co-founder of the Azamat opposition party in 1996, 31 January 2007, Almaty; and Bulat Abilov, then co-chair of the Naghyz Ak Zhol opposition party, former member of parliament under the presidential party ticket, former owner of the Butya company, co-founder of the DVK, and formerly one of the wealthiest businessmen in Kazakhstan, 19 December 2006, Almaty.

²²I would like to thank Dr Rustem Kadyrzanov of the Academy of Sciences of Kazakhstan for emphasising the practice of *reiderstvo* in the world of Kazakhstan's business.

current opposition leader and former FPG leader Bulat Abilov recounts, competitors in the sugar market were forced to give up their businesses to Aliev, who had cut off their supplies and threatened other businesses that continued purchasing sugar from them. Faced with bankruptcy, they had no choice but to sell.²³ The Aliev–Nazarbaeva FPG also used strong-arm tactics to take over a number of non-government national radio and television stations. From 1997 to 2007, Aliev and Nazarbaeva gained ownership of a majority of the Kazakhstan's media holdings, including the *Novoe Pokolenie* and *Karavan* newspapers; the *NTK* (*Nezavisimyi Televizionnyi Kanal*, Independent Television Channel), *KTK* (*Kommercheskii Televizionnyi Kanal*, Commercial Television Channel), *ORT-Kazakhstan* (*Obshchestvennoe Rossiyskoe Televidenie-Kazakhstan* (Russian Public Television, known as *Pervyi Kanal* or Channel 1 since 2002) and *Khabar* television stations; *Europa-Plus*, *Hit-FM*, *Russkoe Radio* and *Radio Retro* radio stations; *Kazakhstan-Today News Agency*; *Alma Media*; and *TV-Media*.

The economic conflict between those in the president's inner circle and second-tier FPGs spilled over into open political conflict in the autumn of 2001, when 20 high-ranking government officials and members of the Kazakhstani business establishment formed the *Demokraticheskii Vybor Kazakhstana* (DVK) opposition movement (Petrushova 2002). The DVK's formation was catalysed by an escalating business conflict between Aliev and other young members of Kazakhstan's economic elite. Second-tier FPG leader Mukhtar Ablyazov, at the time one of the wealthiest people in Kazakhstan, owned the increasingly profitable Bank Turan Alem,²⁴ which was a competitor to Nurbank, a major Kazakhstani bank owned by the Aliev–Nazarbaeva FPG. When Aliev demanded a majority share in Turan Alem, Ablyazov refused.

Importantly, those who had suffered at the hands of, and whose business ambitions were curbed by, members of Nazarbaev's inner circle understood that the problem was not rooted simply in the country's economic system, which was weighted in favour of the president's relations and close allies. They also understood that the structure of the political system was at fault (Junisbai & Junisbai 2005). There were no institutional checks against the arbitrary decisions of the president, just as there were no formal guarantees that would protect their enterprises from claims made by those closest to the president. One prominent DVK founder and former *akim* of Pavlodar *oblast'*, Galymzhan Zhakiyanov, raises this very issue in his recollection of the events leading up to the movement's formation. According to Zhakiyanov,

The circle around Nazarbaev, first of all his son-in-law Aliev, did not hide their intention to take businesses away from these people. Their demands became more and more aggressive. Rakhat Aliev demanded 51% of Bank Turan Alem from Ablyazov. That is racketeering, even worse. He demanded people's personal property and that is it. How is a person to act under those circumstances? Of course he feels aggression to the regime, outraged. They saw a problem in one specific person—in Rakhat Aliev, or another relative of the president, or in his circle—but over time came to understand that the problem lay not in a specific person, in those who demand something from them, but the problem was to a greater degree the political system, in

²³ Author's interview with Bulat Abilov, 19 December 2006, Almaty.

²⁴ As a sign of its success in recent years, in 2007 Fitch Ratings and the Russian journal *Itogi* named Turan Alem Bank the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) bank of the year.

the regime itself, that gives birth to this system of mutual relations [*vzaimootnosheniya*]. And these people in business came to pay attention to politics and speak [out].²⁵

Rozlana Taukina, an opposition journalist, and Dosym Satpaev, a well-known Kazakhstani political analyst who has commented and written extensively on intralite politics, also argue that political demands are rooted in conflicts over big business. Taukina frames the central issue as follows:

When they push a person into a corner and make it so he can't work to feed himself, what should he do? He comes to oppose [the regime]. And so the idea of democracy comes . . . through the need to protect oneself. It is not because, for me, for example, that I studied philosophy and dreamed of democracy, or that I suddenly saw what it would be like to have a democratic country or that I fanatically held on to democratic beliefs. Our opposition is not like that. We all came to it through life experience.²⁶

Similarly, according to Satpaev,

In [Kazakhstan's economic] system, there is a ceiling beyond which no one is allowed to go. They [the elites who established the DVK] reached that ceiling and were not allowed to grow further. And they are all ambitious . . . [I]f you own something that is worth more than those in the inner circle own, that is dangerous. They will let you know that you have to share your wealth. The family and the circle are keeping them, this young oligarchy, back. If you have a great deal of ambition and money and want more, but you can't have it because those in the inner circle are blocking you, you begin to demand that the system be altered to become more liberal, more democratic. Not because you are a democrat, but because it will give you more economic opportunity, and of course political opportunity, as well.²⁷

Indeed, members of the business elite who established the DVK were acutely aware of the existence of a glass ceiling, which under the current system they could not expect to surpass. Bulat Abilov clearly expresses this dynamic based on his own experience. He explains,

I had already reached the ceiling in business. We built a major trading centre [*torgovyi tsentr*, the equivalent of a mall or shopping centre] in Almaty and purchased a series of other businesses. And so what? It was not interesting to me anymore; I had already accomplished all of that. Why couldn't I get into other big manufacturing projects, metal processing, the oil sector, or the gas sector? They let in their own, their relatives, those close to them, others who paid big bribes. I ran into a ceiling in which they said to me, 'Boy, feel free to build another *Ramstor* [grocery store and shopping centre chain in Kazakhstan]. Be content with what you have . . . We let you get this far; we didn't touch you. You should be happy with that'.²⁸

As Collins (2006) has correctly noted, in recent years a new set of political and economic rivals to the 'Nazarbaev clan' has emerged. One key detail, however, is

²⁵ Author's interview with Galymzhan Zhakiyanov, 28 February 2007, Almaty.

²⁶ Author's interview with Rozlana Taukina, director of the media NGO *Zhurnalisty v Bede*, 6 March 2007, Almaty.

²⁷ Author's interview with Dosym Satpaev, 24 February 2007, Almaty.

²⁸ Author's interview with Bulat Abilov, 19 December 2006, Almaty.

missing from Collins's discussion. These rivals were until fairly recently high-profile members of the president's team and are often referred to as the 'products of Nazarbaev'. Far from being members of a competing clan, they were in many respects part and parcel of the business and political establishment created by the president himself. At the same time, these competitors found themselves victims of an economic system that privileges the president's inner circle over FPGs located in the second tier. In the case of the DVK, President Nazarbaev's allies-turned-opponents joined the political opposition, publicly contesting the inner circle's exclusive access to the most profitable sectors of the economy.

Why not clan politics in Kazakhstan?

Despite early signs of the president's support for the *Demokraticeskii Vybor* movement,²⁹ in the end Nazarbaev made a televised stand in defence of his son-in-law against the DVK. To keep Aliev from creating further trouble and to defuse the tension that might lead other elites to join the opposition, President Nazarbaev appointed Aliev to the post of Ambassador to Austria and the Organization of Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE) in a form of political exile (*ssylka*). Aliev's departure greatly calmed the situation, removing both the catalyst and focal point around which so much discontent on the part of the political and business elite had been concentrated. With Aliev out of the country, it proved difficult for the DVK's members to maintain a united front. This, combined with repressive measures taken against those who had 'betrayed' the president, worked against the movement, and a number of signatories to the DVK statement revoked their signatures, returning to government service or to their work in the private sector.

The conflict between FPGs in the inner and outer circles that prompted the formation of the DVK could certainly be interpreted as one clan hoarding access to economic resources to the detriment of other clans. In particular, the president's publicised support for Aliev was a clear example of the preference given to members of the Nazarbaev family. Given the strong extended family ties among Kazakhs and the common practice of privileging one's own relatives over outsiders, the continued role of kinship in politics and the economy is not surprising. As one political observer explained,

Clans and family ties of course play a role in Kazakhstan. Rich people have to share their wealth with other family members; they trust those related to them more than outsiders and thus bring family members into their businesses; and they have to leave an inheritance to their children.³⁰

²⁹President Nazarbaev's press secretary initially announced that 'the president thinks that the movement's initiators acted in accordance with the law. Its declaration is fully in accord with the economic and political goals of the president'. See *Kazakhstan Today*, 21 November 2001, available at: <http://www.gazeta.kz/art.asp?aid=10256>, accessed 3 January 2008.

³⁰Author's interview with anonymous expert working at a private foundation, 11 April 2007, Almaty. This view was echoed by interviews with anonymous (non-opposition) civil society activists, 29 and 30 April 2007.

Rozlana Taukina agrees that kinship obligations influence political actors' calculations, given that 'once removed from power, they have to worry not only about their own wellbeing, but about that of their entire clan, which depends on them'.³¹

Another piece of evidence pointing to the centrality of clans can be found in an earlier opposition movement, founded just five years prior to the emergence of the DVK. 1996 marked the appearance of the *Azamat* movement, whose leaders were Nazarbaev appointees, including former Ambassador to China Murat Auezov and then-chair of the government's Anti-monopoly Committee Petr Svoik. According to Svoik, a number of factors were behind *Azamat's* formation, including popular discontent with the government's market reforms, which had led to the rapid impoverishment of the population and a massive reduction in social programmes. Inter-clan rivalry, specifically between the senior and middle hordes, also played a facilitating role. Traditionally, Svoik recounts, government had been the territory of the senior horde, while those from the middle horde were engaged in the humanities and arts.

Opposition to President Nazarbaev's rule was generally concentrated among the middle horde, and this was true of the *Azamat* movement, as well. The majority of the movement's members were intellectuals associated with the Academy of Sciences, as well as Russians. The catalyst behind the middle horde's support for *Azamat*, according to Svoik, was President Nazarbaev's decision to replace the head of the Academy of Sciences, which had been the middle horde's base (*opora*).³² President Nazarbaev responded quickly and within a period of a few days reversed his decision, leaving the Academy's president in place, thus calming the wave of anger that had built up against him. Without a focal point around which to rally their discontent, many initial supporters left the movement.

In the face of these facts, it would appear that clan politics is alive and well in Kazakhstan. Other evidence, however, points to a more complex situation, one that neither clan nor family interests alone can explain. For instance, some of those who openly broke with the president—namely Mukhtar Ablyazov and Altynbek Sarsenbaiuly (or Sarsenbaev, an opposition leader who was murdered in February 2006)—were themselves members of the senior horde to which Nazarbaev belongs.³³ Bulat Abilov is rumoured to be related to first lady Sara Nazarbaeva and apparently used this relationship to build up his business empire (Khlyupin 1998). These cases strongly suggest that clan identity might not be as significant a determinant of elite actors' preferences or behaviour as has been portrayed in some of the clan politics literature.

Critically, most politicians and political observers in Kazakhstan interviewed as part of this study agree that inter-horde rivalries, which had been reflected in Kazakhstan's politics half a decade earlier, had diminished in importance by the DVK's appearance in 2001. Petr Svoik's comments reflect the view of the majority of respondents. He

³¹ Author's interview with Rozlana Taukina, 6 March 2007, Almaty.

³² Author's interview with Peter Svoik, 31 January 2007, Almaty.

³³ Schatz refers to these two figures as examples of clan clientelism in Kazakhstan (2004, p. 99, 2005, p. 240).

notes that politics ‘... has become much more complex ... Inter-horde divisions continue to play a role, but [this] has become a secondary consideration after other, more important, more modern, parameters’.³⁴ Specifically, current intra-elite conflict revolves around ‘serious business and big money’, rather than kinship ties.³⁵ As Dosym Satpaev puts it,

In Kazakhstan lineage is not the dominant factor. Why? Because elites are guided by economic factors. As the [political and economic] system becomes more complex, the president is unable to ensure a consensus of interests, and the desire for self-protection has led [certain elites] to go into the opposition. If you don’t protect yourself, they [members of the president’s inner circle] will devour you.³⁶

Rather than economic prosperity *per se*, as Collins (2006) argues, it is the growing importance of FPGs’ business interests that has undermined the role of clans in political struggle. Yet, the lessened role of historical cleavages does not mean that political conflict has declined overall. The reverse is true: despite Kazakhstan’s relative economic prosperity in recent years, conflict among FPGs has sharpened (Yuritsyn 2007). One reason for this is that there are no formal or institutionalised mechanisms for resolving intra-elite conflicts that arise as a result of the skewed system of resource allocation. In Kazakhstan’s highly personalised system of rule, President Nazarbaev is the sole arbiter to whom elites appeal when serious conflict arises among them (Satpaev 2006b). However, the president’s task of balancing and smoothing over problems is becoming more difficult to accomplish because the country’s ‘economic system has become too big, too heterogeneous [*raznorodnyi*], for one person to maintain control over it all’.³⁷

Perhaps the most striking evidence against the centrality of clans in Kazakhstani politics can be found within the Nazarbaev family itself. Beginning with a January 2007 attempted break-in at the headquarters of Nurbank, then owned by the Aliev–Nazarbaeva FPG, a series of leaks of compromising material on Aliev and other high-ranking officials punctuated Kazakhstan’s political news. Nurbank’s chair and deputy chair had already both left their positions when Aliev was said to have gathered them and another former bank official on the pretext of an urgent business trip to Kyiv, Ukraine. Instead of escorting them to the airport, however, Aliev’s driver and bodyguards allegedly kidnapped and imprisoned the three in the basement of a private bathhouse, where Aliev is said to have shot at them with a pistol and had them beaten. All of this, it is claimed, was Aliev’s preferred method of forcing them to have the owners of a certain business centre (where Nurbank headquarters were located) sell the building to Aliev at a price well below the market rate. Two of the three who were kidnapped remain missing and are suspected dead.

In February 2007, Aliev returned to Vienna, again as Ambassador to Austria and the OSCE. Instead of facing a second round of political exile, however, within months

³⁴ Author’s interview with Petr Svoik, 31 January 2007.

³⁵ Author’s interview with anonymous expert working at a private foundation, 11 April 2007, Almaty.

³⁶ Author’s interview with Dosym Satpaev, 24 February 2007, Almaty.

³⁷ Author’s interview with Petr Svoik, 31 January 2007, Almaty.

he was completely cut off from the Nazarbaev family. In late May, Aliev was removed from his post, received belated notice that Dariga Nazarbaeva had divorced him, and lost rights to all of his business shares. Kazakhstan's Ministry of Internal Affairs opened a criminal case against him, charging him with kidnapping and possible murder, and put out an international warrant for his arrest. Open information warfare was declared, and the president's advisors devised an anti-Aliev PR campaign that included negative coverage of the president's former son-in-law in the Kazakhstani press and on television.³⁸ A law requiring that at least 50% of all TV and radio stations' programming be in the Kazakh language was used to close the *KTK* television channel and *Karavan* newspaper, both of which belonged to Aliev, for three months.

Collectively, the events leading to Aliev's final fall from grace in 2007 are known as Rakhatgate (Adilov 2007a; Ergalieva 2007; Taukina 2007; Yan 2007; Dosybiev 2007). According to Aliev, all of the claims made against him were ordered from above, inspired by his declared intention to run against Nazarbaev in the 2012 presidential elections (Aliev 2009). Many Kazakhstani political observers, however, point not only to Aliev's presidential ambitions, but also to his increasingly tense relations with other members of the elite, in particular numerous second-tier FPGs and at least one member of the inner circle, Nurtai Abykaev (Adilov 2007b).³⁹ As Rakhatgate wore on, it was also revealed that the former chairman of the board of Nurbank who had been kidnapped was a close relative to then *akim* of Almaty city and current *akim* of Astana, Imangali Tasmagambetov, who, like many members of the elite, was on very poor terms with Aliev.

Neither Dariga Nazarbaeva nor Timur Kulibaev (another well-known son-in-law to the president), survived Rakhatgate unscathed. In the wake of the scandal, control over the *Khabar News Agency*, which Nazarbaeva headed, was turned over to the presidential administration. When early parliamentary elections were scheduled for August 2007, Nazarbaeva—at the time a deputy in the lower house of Parliament (2004–2007), a leader of the newly created *Nur Otan* party—was nowhere to be found on the *Nur Otan* party list. The infamously powerful Nazarbaeva had quietly slipped into the shadows. In addition, during the summer of 2007, Kulibaev—who had not been known for openly harbouring political ambitions, but (along with his wife) had made it into *Forbes* magazine's list of billionaires—was removed from his position as the deputy chair of the board of directors of Samruk. Samruk is one of the largest government holdings and controls Kazakhstan's shares in the oil and gas sectors, including the national oil company KazMunaiGaz.⁴⁰

³⁸Agenstvo nezavisimykh rassledovaniï, 'Kak kazakhstanskïe vlasti fabrikuyut delo protiv Rakhata Alieva', 21 November 2007, available at: <http://www.kub.info/article.php?sid=19763>, accessed 22 November 2007.

³⁹Author's interview with Sergei Duvanov, civil society activist, independent journalist and founder of *Radio Inkar* internet radio station, 8 February 2007, Almaty. See also *Trend Information Agency*, 25 June 2007, available at: <http://news.trendaz.com/cgi-bin/readnews2.pl?newsId=933388&lang=RU>, and *Interfax-Kazakhstan*, 25 June 2007, available at: <http://www.kub.kz/print.php?sid=17739>, both accessed 30 June 2007.

⁴⁰For one interpretation of the reasons for and significance of Kulibaev's removal, see Zubkov (2007).

It appeared that President Nazarbaev was distancing himself from his children and attempting to curb their political influence. At the same time, the Nazarbaev family's deep imprint outside of formal politics—especially in the banking and business worlds—will not be erased in the near future, as the third generation of the first family is coming of age and is being groomed to take their parents' places (Askarov 2007). We can say with some certainty, however, that the unexpected sidelining of Aliev and Nazarbaeva resulted from major conflict between members of the president's family and other FPG leaders. This suggests that kinship ties can be and have been overridden by other considerations—in particular economic ones—even in a political system closely associated for the last 10 years with the interests of the first family.

Why not regional strongmen in Kazakhstan?

In the previous section, evidence was presented that counters the view that politics in Kazakhstan is dominated by kinship and clan interests. We now turn to the second historical cleavage and review the conclusion that regional strongmen have emerged to challenge the authority of the political centre. The discussion is based on observations about two sets of political elites—one appointed and one elected—who are potentially in a position to represent the interests of territorially based constituencies. These include *oblast' akims*, who have been described as rivals to the centre or 'renegades' (Jones Luong 2004, p. 209) and parliamentarians (deputies in the *Mazhilis*, or lower house of parliament, and senators serving in the upper house).

Akims as regional leaders?

As is true of a number of post-Soviet states, in Kazakhstan, the long arm of the executive branch extends down to regional and local politics through a system known as the power vertical (*vertikal' vlasti*) or presidential vertical (*prezidentskaya vertikal'*) (Matsuzato 2004; Sakwa 2004; Schatz 2000), which is intended to streamline decision making,⁴¹ maximise the centre's control over the periphery, and minimise the chances that independent-minded and ambitious elites are able to cultivate a local support base for their own ends. The *akim* is not so much the representative of a particular *oblast'*, which might be the case if *akims* were elected, as he is the president's delegate charged with the implementation of executive decisions handed down to him. Galymzhan Zhakiyanov described the *akim's* limited authority, as well as his subordination to the political centre, in an interview with the author:

As *akim* of Pavlodar *oblast'* I could not resolve many problems of the *oblast'*, of the budget, [or] the social problems of the population because the system was centralised and all decisions were made in the centre, and personally by the president. Everything went there. Many questions, even small ones, are all decided at the centre. Of course, the president cannot

⁴¹As Cummings (2000) and Jones Luong (2004) point out, this centralised system is, however, plagued with inefficiency and lack of accountability. In early 2007, the president announced a new administrative reform, which applies corporate management principles to government, creating an additional layer of administrators at the local level who are accountable only to the president. For criticism of this line of reform, see Bekturganova (2007) and Erimbetov (2007).

decide all the questions; instead, he delegates his powers to some officials who either cannot or do not want to resolve the issues.⁴²

In addition to the restrictions facing *akims* described in the passage above, the likelihood that an *akim* will emerge as an independent political actor is further diminished by a set of powerful formal mechanisms at the president's disposal: the right to appoint, remove and rotate *akims*. There is little evidence to suggest that the principle of appointment will be altered in the future to make the *akim* a popularly elected position with a set term.⁴³ Thus, instead of depending on the will of the voters to remain in power, *akims* find themselves dependent on the president for both getting into and staying in office.

It is certainly true that *akims* have accrued resources that could be used to increase their power *vis-à-vis* the president, including personal wealth (amassed through both corruption and other means) and access to funds that may result from foreign investment. Such revenue, which may lie beyond the control of central authorities, has been described as an important source of informal power for regional leaders. However, in addition to financial resources, *akims* require human resources, especially the ability to mobilise or rally the public, if they are to launch an effective challenge to the president. Just as those who wish to establish an alternative centre of power need financial autonomy to stake their political claims (McMann 2006), they also need active support among some segment of the population to demonstrate to the centre that they are serious contenders who cannot be easily silenced or ignored.

Frequent cadre rotation has prevented *akims* from developing this kind of following. By limiting the time *akims* spend in office, President Nazarbaev has kept *akims* from either becoming too popular with constituents or entrenching themselves—and their underlings—in the *oblast'* economy. This is because a freshly appointed *akim* often replaces those working for the previous *akim* with his own network or team.⁴⁴ As Table 2 illustrates, *akim* tenure is notably short and turnover high. From 1992 to 2009, an average of six *akims* were appointed to a given *oblast'*, plus Astana (the capital) and Almaty (known as the southern capital and Kazakhstan's financial centre), although the actual number of appointments during the period ranges from four to 10. The *oblast'* headed by the most *akims* (10) is East Kazakhstan, and the least number of *oblast'* heads (four) has been appointed to Karaganda. The mean tenure for all *akims* is 2.73 years, with the longest average term

⁴²Author's interview, 28 February 2007, Almaty. The view that *akims'* autonomy and freedom of action are constrained by the presidential vertical was reiterated in interviews with Evgenii Zhovtis, civil society activist and director of the Kazakhstan International Human Rights Bureau, 6 February 2007, Almaty; Tamara Kaleeva, director of the *Adil Soz* International Foundation for Freedom of Speech (independent media watchdog organisation), 5 February 2007, Almaty; anonymous independent (non-opposition) *Mazhilis* deputy, 25 April 2007, Astana; anonymous academics, 12 February, 2 March and 3 March 2007, Almaty; and anonymous journalists and political commentators, 5 February, 8 February, 5 April and 12 April 2007, Almaty.

⁴³Due to constitutional amendments adopted in 2007 the appointment of *akims* is now subject to the approval of local councils (*maslikhats*). For an analysis of this and other changes to the electoral system, see Yermukanov (2007).

⁴⁴Author's interview with Evgenii Zhovtis, 6 February 2007, Almaty. For anecdotal evidence of this dynamic, see Khlyupin (1998, p. 12) and Schatz (2004, pp. 105–6).

TABLE 2
TENURE OF *OBLAST'* AKIMS, 1992–2009*

Oblast'/ major city	Average tenure (years)**	No. of akims	Akims in office longest
Akmola	3.25	6	Andrei Braun (February 1992–July 1997); Sergei Kulagin (September 1998–March 2004)
Aktobe	3.08	5	Aslan Musin (September 1995–April 2002)
Almaty	2.57	6	Zamanbek Nurkadilov (December 1997–May 2001); Shalbai Kulmakhonov (May 2001–August 2005)
Atyrau	2.92	6	Ravil Cherdabaev (October 1994–February 1999); Aslan Musin (April 2002–October 2006)
East Kazakhstan	1.90	10	Vitalii Mette (April 1997–February 2003)
Karaganda	4.31	4	Petr Nefedov (February 1992–July 1997); Kamaltin Mukhamedzhanov (October 1999–January 2006)
Kostanai	2.92	5	Umirzak Shukeev (August 1998–March 2004)
Kyzylorda	3.25	6	Seilbek Shaumakhonov (February 1992–September 1995); Berdibek Saparbaev (September 1995–July 1999); Serikbai Nurgisaev (July 1999–April 2004)
Mangystau	2.33	7	Bolat Palymbetov (February 2002–January 2006)
North Kazakhstan	3.12	6	Vladimir Gartman (February 1992–December 1997); Tair Mansurov (December 2003–October 2007)
Pavlodar	3.32	6	Danial Akhmetov (January 1993–December 1997); Kairat Nurpeisov (June 2003–September 2008)
South Kazakhstan	2.44	8	Zautbek Turisbekov (December 1993–December 1997); Bolat Zhylykshiev (August 2002–September 2006)
West Kazakhstan	3.88	5	Kabibulla Zhakupov (January 1993–December 2000)
Zhambyl	3.06	5	Omurbek Baigeldy (February 1992–October 1995); Serik Umbetov (February 1999–May 2004)
Almaty City	4.04	5	Viktor Khrapunov (June 1997–December 2004)
Astana City	3.23	6	Amanzhol Bulekpaev (February 1992–December 1997); Adilbek Dzhaksybekov (December 1997–June 2003)
Kokshetau ^a	1.31	4	Kyzyr Zhumabaev (November 1993–June 1996)
Semipalatinsk ^b	1.72	3	Galymzhan Zhakiyanov (June 1994–March 1997)
Taldykorgan ^c	1.72	3	Serik Akhymbekov (April 1993–March 1996)
Turgai ^d	1.72	3	Zhakan Kosabaev (June 1993–October 1995)
Zhezkazgan ^e	1.31	4	Grigorii Yurchenko (February 1992–June 1994)

Notes: *Sample mean = 2.73 years in office; median = 2.92 years; mode = 1.72 years; standard deviation = 0.87 years.

**Current *akims* (as of the time of writing) are not included in the *oblast'* averages, which were calculated using the beginning and ending month and year of *akim* appointments.

^aMerged with North Kazakhstan *oblast'* in May 1997.

^bMerged with East Kazakhstan *oblast'* (April 1997).

^cMerged with Almaty *oblast'* (April 1997).

^dMerged with Kostanai and Akmolinskaya *oblasti* in April 1997.

^eMerged with Karaganda *oblast'* in May 1997.

Sources: Asylbekov (1997), Asylbekov (2001), Ashimbaev (2006), Ashimbaev (2008), Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, available at: www.akorda.kz, accessed 14 July 2009.

in office found in Almaty city (4.04 years), Karaganda *oblast'* (4.31 years), and in Western Kazakhstan (3.88 years).

A number of *akims* have served longer than the mean, as the last column in Table 2 illustrates. Interestingly, however, only two of those who have spent the most time as regional heads—Zamanbek Nurkadilov and Galymzhan Zhakiyanov—have been

associated with significant conflict with the centre.⁴⁵ As previously mentioned, due to behind-the-scenes conflict with the president or the inner circle, Zhakiyanov and Nurkadilov (separately) emerged as prominent opposition leaders. After openly opposing President Nazarbaev, Zhakiyanov served five years in prison on corruption charges, while Nurkadilov died under mysterious circumstances in 2005. Government officials declared his death a suicide.

Not only are elite members who have served as *akims* kept from staying in office for too long, they are also rotated into and out of their posts, as well as shuffled between the central and regional governments (Satpaev 2007). Much like high turnover, overlapping political roles hinder the emergence of regional elites who could use their positions to launch a successful challenge against the centre from the periphery. When officials are rotated into and out of the central government, as is common practice in Kazakhstan, there is no clear-cut boundary separating regional elites from central elites.⁴⁶ This makes it difficult to speak of *oblast'* heads as having interests that are distinct from and in opposition to those of the centre. Due to the blurring of boundaries, furthermore, the analytical separation of central and regional elites is both problematic and artificial. As one Kazakhstani political scientist summarised the situation,

In our system a person today is an *akim*, tomorrow a minister, after that an ambassador, then a deputy, then a senator ... [We do not have] a layered system like in America, in which [politicians] serve as a senator or governor for many years ... In our system, a person quickly moves from one branch of government into another branch of government. Today he is in the centre, tomorrow in the region, later he is out of the country as an ambassador.⁴⁷

In fact, the majority of *akims* has served in a number of other official capacities, including as ambassadors, ministers, advisors to the president and even as *akims* in other *oblasti*. The career patterns of three *akims* chosen from those who have been in office during the period for which data are available typify this dynamic.⁴⁸ Before his appointment as *akim* of Akmola *oblast'* in March 2004, Mazhit Esenbaev had, among other posts, served as both deputy *akim* and *akim* of Karaganda *oblast'*, minister of finance, chair of the national tax inspection, minister of economics and trade, and assistant to the president. Daniyal Akhmetov, who was appointed to govern Pavlodar *oblast'* on two separate occasions, was also the head of the Ekibastuz city administration and served as a deputy prime minister and first deputy prime minister prior to being appointed prime minister. At various points in his career, current

⁴⁵Baltash Tursumbaev also publicly criticised the president while serving as *akim* (Kostanai *oblast'*, 1993–1995) and, during his term as Ambassador to Turkey, was courted by the political opposition to run for president in 1999. In response, President Nazarbaev appointed Tursumbaev to the short-lived position of deputy prime minister. Three months later, the president dissolved the government. Not only was Tursumbaev removed from office, he also never again served in any official capacity. Author's interviews with Baltash Tursumbaev, 14 March 2007; anonymous political scientist, 12 February 2007, Almaty; Rozlana Taukina, 5 February 2007, Almaty; and anonymous journalists, 2 March 2007, Almaty. For more on co-optation of elite contenders to the president, see also Cummings (2005, p. 108).

⁴⁶For a similar argument, see Cummings (2005, pp. 106–7).

⁴⁷Author's interview with anonymous political scientist, 12 February 2007, Almaty.

⁴⁸Biographical information was gathered from Ashimbaev (2006, 2008).

Mazhilis deputy Aslan Musin served as deputy prime minister, speaker of parliament, *akim* of Aktyubinsk *oblast'* and Atyrau *oblast'*, as well as vice minister and minister of the economy.

Finally, if we wish to speak in terms of the *akim's* potential strength and weakness relative to the centre, two points are worth accentuating. First, *akims* may be considered 'strong' in the sense that, as representatives of the executive branch in the regions, they are given access to numerous opportunities for self-enrichment. This includes the opportunity to build up their businesses and purchase property and build homes in restricted or exclusive areas. Under normal conditions, their official position protects them from investigation and other formalities that ordinary business owners engaged in the same activities would face. They also have the power to appoint those below them, creating a system in which *akims* act as patrons much like the executive who appoints them, albeit on a smaller scale. So long as the *akim* carries out orders from the centre and does not overstep the powers given to him, he is permitted to continue his work and his self-enrichment generally undisturbed. At the same time, *akims* are 'weak' relative to the president who appoints them precisely because of the tendency of officials to use their positions of formal power for personal ends.⁴⁹ In this sense, corruption is welcome by those at the top because well-documented evidence of wrongdoing (*kompromat*) can be used to keep lower-level officials obedient out of a justified fear of imprisonment for misuse of office (Darden 2001).

Parliamentarians as regional leaders?

In theory, members of parliament are responsible for making and passing laws⁵⁰ and for creating public policy, as well as for representing the interests of and allocating resources to their constituents (Davidson *et al.* 2008; Fenno 1978; Mayhew 1974). In reality, the link between Kazakhstan's citizens and their representatives in the legislature is weakened by a combination of disincentives, which prevent parliamentarians from courting and maintaining support among electoral or other popular constituencies. Such disincentives include oversight of candidate lists by the *akim* and presidential administration (prior to the 2007 elections), the increased importance of loyalty to the presidential party for securing a seat in parliament (since 2007), and the inclusion of presidential appointees to both houses of parliament.

Prior to Kazakhstan's switch to a party list voting system in 2007, *Mazhilis* candidates underwent close scrutiny by *oblast'* *akims*, and only those who passed

⁴⁹ Author's interviews with Tamara Kaleeva, 5 February 2007, Almaty; anonymous NGO leader, 17 May 2007, Almaty; and Evgenii Zhovtis, 6 February 2007, Almaty. This is not to say, however, that *akims* have no interest in public goods or in improving the life of those in their *oblast'*. Those *akims* who are active proponents of the needs of their *oblast'* can still be concerned with their own personal interests, including material enrichment. In other words, these two goals are not mutually exclusive.

⁵⁰ Kazakhstan's parliament does not even quite fulfil this role, since the executive branch initiates an overwhelming percentage of laws that are passed by the legislature. According to the estimates of *Mazhilis* deputy and *Nur Otan* member Nurbakh Rustemov (interview with author, 19 February 2007, Almaty), 90–95% of the laws are initiated not by parliament, but by the government (*pravitel'stvo*), which, along with the prime minister, was a technical organ subordinate to the president until 2007. In 2007, changes to the constitution transferred the power to appoint the prime minister to the *Mazhilis*.

muster were included in the final list of contenders. Candidate lists were also subject to review by the presidential administration.⁵¹ As is the appointment of *akims*, the review of *Mazhilis* candidates was a part of Kazakhstan's vertical system of rule, in which presidential power dominates other potential centres of power, including the legislature. This unofficial review system worked to weed out (although imperfectly) potentially problematic candidates and encourage legislators' loyalty to the executive. The executive's informal power of candidate appraisal and selection lent it significant control over parliamentary elections, preventing the emergence of regional strongmen or potential renegades in parliament.

Formal changes to the electoral system have made the informal system of candidate approval obsolete. Yet, key features of the new system similarly encourage parliamentarians' loyalty and deference to the president (Isaacs 2008; Sysoev 2007), as well as pre-empt the development of popular networks linking parliamentarians and supporters in the regions. Until 2007, 67 *Mazhilis* deputies were elected to single-mandate electoral districts, while the remaining 10 were elected on the basis of party lists. Under the old system, independent candidates were commonplace, and many parliamentarians were not affiliated with any party. Beginning with the 2007 parliamentary election, electoral districts were scrapped and supplanted by a united nation-wide district (*edinyi obshchenatsional'nyi okrug*) to which deputies are elected via party-list voting. Ostensibly intended to present a modern, democratic image to the rest of the world, the introduction of party list voting has heightened the importance of membership in the presidential party for those seeking a seat in parliament. Given that no other party gathered enough official votes to reach the 7% threshold, all seats in the current legislature went to members of the *Nur Otan* presidential party. While the previous legislature (2004–2007) was often referred to as President Nazarbaev's 'pocket parliament', the current legislature marks the first time since independence that Kazakhstan has come under formal one-party rule.

The legislator–constituent connection is further diluted by the inclusion of presidential appointees to parliament. Revisions made in 2007 to the Constitution and the Law on Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Status of its Deputies specify that nine *Mazhilis* deputies are to be chosen by the People's Assembly, itself a non-elected body and widely regarded as subordinate to the president (Khlyupin 1998).⁵² Prior to 2007, the president had the power to appoint seven senators per term; in 2007, this number was increased to 15. According to the law, the president appoints these 15 senators to ensure that the interests of Kazakhstan's many cultural and ethnic groups, as well as other significant societal interests, are represented in the Senate.⁵³

⁵¹ Author's interviews with anonymous former *akim*, 16 March 2007, Almaty, and with Galymzhan Zhakiyanov, 8 February 2007, Almaty; see also Cummings (2000, pp. 41–42, 2005, p. 105).

⁵² Rather than 'chosen', as is used here, Article 4, paragraph 4 of the Law on Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Status of its Deputies states that 'nine deputies of the *Mazhilis* are elected (*izbrannykh*) by the People's Assembly of Kazakhstan' (see <http://www.parlam.kz/Information.aspx?doc=4&lan=ru-RU>, accessed 14 July 2009).

⁵³ Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Article 50, paragraph 2, available at: <http://www.parlam.kz/Information.aspx?doc=2&lan=ru-RU>, and the Law on Parliament of the Republic of

Not only have formal and informal practices hampered the ability of parliamentarians to build deep-rooted ties with constituents in the regions; as with *akims*, traditionally high turnover in parliament has prevented the emergence of legislators with a significant following among voters. Focusing first on the *Mazhilis*, Table 3 indicates that the majority of deputies who were elected prior to 2007 under the old electoral rules were not re-elected after their first term in office. This pattern suggests that deputies were presented with few opportunities or incentives to cultivate popular bases of support. The data in Table 3 were calculated for all deputies who have served during the first (1996–1999), second (1999–2005), third (2004–2007), and fourth (2007–present) parliaments.⁵⁴ Significantly, the mean number of terms in the *Mazhilis* for the period covered is 1.37. Most deputies (about 72%) have served only one term in office, while a little more than a quarter (27.68%) has been re-elected at least once. Just one deputy (Erkin Ramazanov) has served in the *Mazhilis* all four terms.

Table 4 paints a more complex picture in the Senate. Incumbency in the Senate is more common than in the *Mazhilis*, and more than half of the senators in office to date have served two or more terms. Unlike the situation in the *Mazhilis*, where less than 10% of deputies has maintained their seats in the legislature for three terms, about a quarter (24.79%) of senators has done so. On the surface, these findings suggest that the Senate provides some opportunity for political elites to represent the interests of particular *oblasti*, as well as to develop networks of support in the regions. However, the link between senators and a popular support base is far from clear-cut. This is

TABLE 3
INCUMBENCY AMONG MAZHILIS DEPUTIES, 1996–2007 (N = 242)*

Number of terms**	1	2	3	4
Number of deputies	175 (72.31%)	46 (19.01%)	20 (8.26%)	1 (0.41%)

Notes: *68 deputies were listed in the first session, 82 in the second, 77 in the third and 108 and in the fourth.
**Sample mean = 1.37 terms; mode = 1.00 terms; median = 1.00 terms; standard deviation = 0.65 years.

Source: The Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, available at: <http://www.parlam.kz>, accessed 14 July 2009.

TABLE 4
INCUMBENCY AMONG SENATORS, 1996–2007 (N = 117)*

Number of terms**	1	2	3	4
Number of deputies	53 (45.30%)	35 (29.91%)	21 (17.95%)	8 (6.84%)

Notes: *65 senators were listed in the first session, 29 in the second, 51 in the third and 47 in the fourth.

**Sample mean = 1.86 terms; mode = 1.00 terms; median = 2.00 terms; standard deviation = 0.94 terms

Source: The Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, available at: <http://www.parlam.kz>, accessed 14 July 2009.

Kazakhstan and the Status of its Deputies, Article 4, paragraph 3, available at: <http://www.parlam.kz/Information.aspx?doc=4&lan=ru-RU>, both accessed 23 June 2009.

⁵⁴Data for the 12th and 13th Supreme Soviets, which preceded the *Mazhilis*, were not available.

because senators are elected indirectly by local officials, rather than directly by popular vote. The members of local councils (called *maslikhats*)—not the voters—in a given *oblast'* are responsible for both nominating and electing representatives to the Senate.⁵⁵

Based on the data on *oblast'* *akims* and parliamentarians presented in this section, what is striking in Kazakhstan is the considerable gap that separates elites from popular constituencies of any kind—clan, regional or otherwise. This is just as true of elites in the political opposition as it is of elites in government, both elected and appointed (Satpaev 2007).⁵⁶ The absence of a social base is significant since clan and regional elites require more than financial resources to compete with the centre. Potential challengers also need a source of popular support that can be mobilised in their favour should the president take repressive measures against them as punishment for their disloyalty. Moreover, to be considered the leader of a particular constituency or societal group such as a clan or region, it logically follows that one must both represent and claim support among ordinary people who belong to that group. Without strong ties linking elites to other members of the clans or regions for which they are supposed to stand, it is difficult to speak of strongmen or renegades who can rival the centre.

Conclusions

Over and over in interviews with the author, political actors and observers mentioned the significance of clans in Kazakhstani politics. On the surface, this would seem to corroborate earlier findings that clans are the key players in the struggle over who gets what (and how much). Yet, the use of the word clan is misleading if one interprets it as meaning a kinship network that corresponds to a horde or tribe. It is common for those in Kazakhstan to mention the 'Nazarbaev clan', which consists of his family and close allies, as being in direct competition with other groups. However, the 'Nazarbaev clan' itself is not bound primarily by blood ties. As we have seen, some of the most influential figures in the president's inner circle, such as Aleksandr Mashkevich, Aleksandr Kim and Aleksandr Ni, are neither related to the president nor even of the same ethnicity.

One point central to Collins's (2006) argument is that interest-based organisations (such as business or oligarchic groups) are not among the primary actors in Central Asian politics. Although such organisations have been termed clans, Collins argues that they are not clans in the formal sense of the word. For Collins, as well as for Schatz (2005), clans are rooted in kinship and lineage.⁵⁷ This, Collins contends, makes them fundamentally distinct from other forms of clientelism, as well as distinct from other forms of political and economic self-organisation guided by short-term

⁵⁵*Maslikhats*, while popularly elected, are often dependent of the *akim*. As a sign of dependence, *Mazhilis* deputy Serik Abdrakhmanov explains, 'Not one *maslikhat* in Kazakhstan has ever come out against the *akim* in the entire 12 year period of its existence as an elected body' (interview with author, 8 April 2007, Astana).

⁵⁶Author's interview with Sergei Duvanov, 8 February 2007, Almaty.

⁵⁷Collins, however, has been criticised in both Schatz (2005) and Radnitz (2007) for defining clans too broadly to be analytically useful.

economic interests. Yet, based on data collected during this study, it appears that, in Kazakhstan, those in the position to influence decisions about who gets what, when and how are in fact elite-led pressure groups, rather than kinship networks that connect elites to a mass-based constituency.

Throughout this article, I have also touched upon the debate over the status of the president as a strong leader in firm control over other political actors as opposed to a weak one beholden to regional or clan ‘power brokers’ (Starr 2006). On the one hand, it is often assumed that the Central Asian presidents have been able to amass enormous formal and informal powers and that all resources and decisions regarding economic and political reform flow from their personages. The opposite view is that these presidents, including President Nazarbaev, are in reality reacting to initiatives from below, from other political actors pressing for greater power or autonomy. Which is correct?

In Kazakhstan, the president is undeniably ‘strong’ in that he is viewed—for the time being—as the sole guarantor of elites’ privileged access to capital and wealth (in many cases initially obtained illegally via privatisation) to which they have become accustomed.⁵⁸ The president is also the final arbiter to whom elites appeal when serious conflict arises between rival FPGs. No other political figure or formal institution has the independence to carry out this important function.⁵⁹ As the last first secretary of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, President Nazarbaev was blessed with another source of strength. The president inherited direct control over the state’s coercive organs, which have been used to prevent and remove threats to the political *status quo*. In addition, by the period 1994–1995 the president was able to curb the ambitions of an independent-minded parliament and has since (with one or two exceptions) kept strong political opponents from gaining access to the legislative branch. Finally, despite separatist sentiments among ethnic Russians residing along the northern border and the autonomy that *oblast’ akims* might have possessed in the early years of independence, in recent years these threats have subsided (Melvin 2001). Combined, these factors lend the president an aura of invulnerability.

At the same time, the president’s ‘weakness’ may prove to be the very financial–industrial groups that were formed under him as a result of policies promoting the development of a market economy. As we have seen, the ambitions of some elites—but, significantly, not the majority—have been frustrated by Kazakhstan’s highly personalised system of rule. For now, however, most elites continue to back the president and deeply fear real political change, which could potentially threaten their privileged positions. So long as the economic pie continues to expand and remains large enough to be divided among the country’s numerous competing

⁵⁸ Author’s interview with Evgenii Zhovtis, 6 February 2007, Almaty.

⁵⁹ In an interview with the author (19 February 2007, Almaty), *Mazhilis* deputy Nurbakh Rustemov explained, ‘We have a presidential form of governance, and this gives us the opportunity to do exactly that: support the president. On the other hand, it is not necessary just because we have a presidential form of government, but because the president is the guarantor of stability in our country. And in reality he does guarantee stability because he has great authority in the country. No one else can be said to claim this position’.

financial–industrial groups, it is unlikely that the president will lose wholesale the support of the country’s economic and political elite.⁶⁰

Yet, despite his excellent health, President Nazarbaev remains a mere mortal. All of Kazakhstan’s elites are well aware that his tenure as head of the country will end sooner or later, even if unexpectedly.⁶¹ Unlike in totalitarian Turkmenistan, which experienced a quiet and undisputed succession after the death of President Niyazov, with President Nazarbaev’s departure chances are that Kazakhstan’s financial–industrial groups will fight it out among themselves to have their favoured candidate installed at the head of government. Why should this be the case? The key difference is that under Niyazov, Turkmenistan’s economy remained centralised and never experienced liberalising economic reforms. Under Nazarbaev, however, Kazakhstan’s economy has moved fairly close to market capitalism, albeit with serious limitations, such as extensive corruption and significant barriers to competition in key sectors of the economy. As a result, elite-led groups with financial autonomy have cropped up, and they have the political and economic resources to stake their claim once the president exits centre stage. No one knows when that day will come, but all are quietly preparing for it.

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⁶⁰The economy’s overwhelming dependence on natural resource extraction, however, makes it vulnerable to changes in the world market. As the current financial crisis demonstrates, Kazakhstan’s boom could come to an end without much advanced notice.

⁶¹Author’s interviews with Petr Svoik, 31 January 2007, Almaty; anonymous media NGO leader, 17 May 2007, Almaty; and then *Mazhilis* deputy Amalbek Tshanov, 14 April 2007, Astana.

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Appendix. Research methodology

During fieldwork, I carried out in-depth interviews in Russian with 69 Kazakhstani political observers and actors and an additional six representatives of international donor organisations. Interviews took place in Almaty and Astana. Political observers (or experts) included academics, political analysts and journalists, as well as civil society activists (heads of non-government organisations that are not associated with the political opposition). I also interviewed heads and managers of five private Kazakhstani businesses and one member of the board of directors of a state-owned company. Political actors included people who were members of the ruling coalition and elites who defected from the ruling coalition to form political opposition movements, plus other leaders and members of opposition political parties. I deliberately included in the sample respondents with diverse motives and points of view. Some respondents were pro-government; some were in the opposition camp; and

others were highly critical of both groups. The breakdown of interviews by type of respondent is shown in Table A1.

Every effort was made to protect respondents' right to privacy. Public figures—including appointed and elected officials, opposition leaders, and well-known political observers who appear in the newspapers, radio and television—are identified by name, except in cases where they asked to remain anonymous. All other respondents, including NGO leaders, journalists, and rank and file opposition supporters, are unnamed.

Because my main interest was to discover patterns in elite defections to the political opposition and in changes to the composition of the opposition over time, many of the questions I asked were directed to those purposes. The interviews were semi-structured and targeted according to the type of respondent (elite defector or person knowledgeable about Kazakhstan's opposition). A sample of the questions asked is included in Table A2. Since I had previously lived, studied and worked in Kazakhstan

TABLE A1
NUMBER OF INTERVIEWEES BY TYPE OF RESPONDENT

<i>Type of respondent</i>	<i>Quantity</i>
Elites in the ruling coalition	7
Elite defectors	11
Other opposition leaders and members	10
Scholars and political analysts	16
Journalists	9
Civil society activists	11
Heads of private business	5
Foreign assistance community	6
TOTAL	75

TABLE A2
SELECTED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions asked of elite defectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Your political ideals are widely known. I would like to know more about the practical side of your decision to oppose the president. In practical, rather than ideological terms, how would you describe your departure from the ruling coalition to the political opposition? ● Practical, intelligent individuals weigh the costs and benefits of different courses of action. Thinking back to the time when you made your decision to join the opposition, what do you recall were the major factors that you took into consideration? ● How did you assess your chances for success? ● What kind of reaction from the president and other members of the elite did you expect? ● Were you worried about being cut off from your source of livelihood by the authorities? Did you worry about how you would sustain your family after taking an oppositional stance? ● Were you concerned about the effect of your decision on your safety and that of your loved ones?
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(continued)

TABLE A2
(Continued)

Questions asked of experts*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the political opposition in Kazakhstan? ● Within every governing coalition, there are times when actors' interests or policy preferences conflict. This is a normal part of politics, since whenever large groups of people get together they are bound to have differences of opinion. But within every system of governance there are ways to resolve such conflicts. Based on your knowledge of politics in your country, what are the main channels for political actors to resolve their differences when they arise? ● How would you characterise the kinds of political differences or political conflicts that predominate in Kazakhstan? What do they tend to be about? ● Western scholars have come up with a number of hypotheses to explain political outcomes and political conflict in Central Asia. Some argue that competition between clans is the most important factor, while others argue that competition between regional elites and central elites is the most important factor. Others argue that modernisation/ economic development lays the foundation for political conflict between elites. Still others say that elites who are excluded from the most lucrative posts or benefits from the patronage system are most likely to oppose the president and/or his regime. Based on your expert knowledge and intimate understanding of politics in your country, do any of these explanations hold true? Or is there something else that you would argue is a better explanation? ● Since independence, which elites have joined the political opposition? ● As a close observer of politics in your country, what conclusions have you come to regarding the decision of elites to leave the ruling coalition and join the opposition? Do you see these developments as a compilation of unrelated individual decisions or as evidence of a more general trend? ● In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the political opposition? ● What kinds of resources do they possess and what kinds of resources do they lack? For example, money, public support, mass media, connections? ● How would you describe the linkage between elites (apart from the president) and the broader public? Is public support widespread in your opinion? Is support confined to certain groups or cleavages in society? ● What about public support for the opposition? Is public support widespread in your opinion? Is support for the opposition confined to certain groups or cleavages in society?
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Notes: *Experts include Kazakhstani political analysts, academics, journalists, elites in the ruling coalition, other opposition members (non-defectors) and non-opposition civil society activists.

for five years in total, I went into the field with a firm list of observers and opposition leaders that I hoped to interview. At the end of each interview, I asked for the respondent to suggest at least one other person he or she felt would be a good contact

for my research. I also attended events and roundtables organised by civil society activists, analysts and opposition parties and used these opportunities to make contact with political actors and observers.

I am indebted to Sabit Zhusupov (1947–2007), who set up interviews with elites in the ruling coalition, and to a family member of an elite defector to the opposition, who organised my first interviews with the political opposition and set the wheels in motion for this study. Without their help, I would never have had access to the diverse group of elites in power and in the opposition that I was able to interview.