

Book Review:

Bringing the Formal Back In. Party Evolution in Kazakhstan

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Party System Formation in Kazakhstan. Between Formal and Informal Politics by Rico Isaacs, 2011, London and New York: Routledge.

Rico Isaacs' extensive study of party development in post-Soviet Kazakhstan is an invaluable contribution to the growing body of literature on formal and informal politics in post-Soviet states and regimes. It provides an in-depth theoretical exploration of neopatrimonialism, utilising various contemporary sources and primary data, including numerous interviews with political actors in Kazakhstan.

The book poses a timely question: how do informal politics modify and shape formal party development and how do these formal institutions, in turn, affect the informal 'patrimonial politics'? Isaacs focuses on post-Soviet Kazakhstan, where he argues that presidential powers, extensive patronage network and personalism are so powerful that electoral and party activity formal laws 'are designed in such a way that they can be selectively interpreted by clients loyal to the president' (Isaacs, 2011, p. 8).

Isaacs' findings suggest that in these institutionalised neopatrimonial conditions, the party system becomes an instrument of manipulation and re-legitimation of the president and the regime. These conditions create a distinct elitist field, where the elite competition and selection is based on the loyalty to the president, and as a result, counter-elites are sometimes circumscribed from electoral participation. According to Isaacs, this leads to a system where pro-presidential parties mitigate elite competition and promote the role of president Nazarbayev as a sole power figure. Parties emerge, unite, split and cease to exist via this party system institutionalisation from above. As a result, this institutionalised neopatrimonialism has contributed to the creation of clientelist parties loyal to the regime but also disconnected the society from parties that were supposed to contribute to the democratic development of Kazakhstan.

The analysis in the book is presented in a very structured and coherent way. The introductory chapter ties up a very detailed analysis of contemporary political theory in the Central Asian setting and provides a comprehensive critical approach to some of the most ubiquitous concepts such as clans, informal politics and political parties. The second chapter provides the book's main analytical framework – neopatrimonialism, explaining the connection of both formal and informal politics in the party formation.

In Chapter 3, Isaacs provides a coherent overview of the historical contextualisation of political development in Kazakhstan. This chapter is an essential read for any student interested in contemporary political developments in Kazakhstan, as the author effectively marries different themes with the historical backdrop. Chapter 4 focuses on the institutional change and on the constraints imposed by the formal neopatrimonialism on party development in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. The analysis focuses on the role of president Nazarbayev who was 'in a pivotal position to define the formal institutional constraints shaping party development' (2011, p. 78). The discussion of the ideologies, membership and purposes of different parties in the neopatrimonial system is the focal point of Chapter 5. Isaacs' main argument evolves around the ways in which the pressing need to remain loyal to the president shapes the ways in which parties are organised and work. He concludes that parties' 'organizational basis

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is founded on the informal power held by factional elite groups and charismatic individuals found in neopatrimonial regimes' (2011, p. 111). Based on this analysis, five types of parties are presented and analysed. All five types are elite-led parties only. This conclusion also ties in with the argument that Isaacs makes about parties being 'inward-looking institutions', whose 'role is not to appeal to society and perform the role of representing social interests' but 'rather to act to structure informal factional competition and represent elite interests' (2011, p. 129).

The book is an invaluable contribution to the study of political transformations in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Central Asia in general as it provides a very succinct and well grounded theoretical and contextual approach. Every chapter is written in a very coherent but also very focused and detailed way. The author is also successful in tying the empirical data with the historical contextualisation and the book's main argument. It provides a convincing and detailed answer to the questions Isaacs poses at the beginning. The book is also a good starting point for a comparative analysis with other post-Soviet regimes in the region and beyond. Isaacs' attention to detail and succinct writing add value to the book. Having said that, this study could have benefited from a wider sociological consideration. While the political analysis and historical contextualisation read very well, one keeps on questioning the nature of the parties' popularity and the societal response to the political staging. In chapter 6, Passiveness and Disconnection, Isaacs provides his view of the societal disconnect from the party politics and explains the stable popularity of president Nazarbayev as well as the pervasiveness of the leading *Nur Otan* party. This analysis is diverse and backed up by interviews and some secondary sociological data, which unfortunately is very scarce. For example, Isaacs presents opinion poll data collected by the Association of Sociologists and Political Scientists (ASIP) on the political passivity of their population.

However, this approach is problematic from two perspectives – the regularity of opinion poll collections is not organised in a systematic and historical perspective; in other words, it does not provide historical continuity in these studies. Also, this type of surveying fails to acknowledge the shifts in political attitudes. The question still remains whether these surveys could explain the popular support for oppositional parties and movements such as *DVK*, *Ak Zhol* and/or regional participation in a counter-party organisation that emerged in 2001 and remained relatively popular until 2011. Isaacs is right in pointing out to the importance of *Nur Otan's* leading party regional representation via the local municipalities and *akimats*, which was not available to opposition parties, is an important factor attributing to a party's official popularity and electoral success. However, it is also important to research the grassroots participation in the regions, and a more detailed study on political attitudes in different regions and municipalities, various ethnic groups and classes is definitely needed.

To be fair, Isaacs makes an attempt to compensate for this gap with more interviews and conceptual explanations ranging from Kazakhstani socio-cultural contexts to the Soviet legacy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). It is evident from the analysis of only a few available surveys that Isaacs is aware of the limitations provided by the absence of consistent and reliable sociological data of the political support in Kazakhstan. Sparse surveys do not reflect the vast societal changes in attitudes and support for various parties, leaders and shifts in political trust. The 2001-2005 oppositional momentum and substantial societal support for the oppositional movements and parties is documented sporadically and usually is unavailable, which is also reflected in Isaacs' analysis. Nevertheless, his ability to utilise political theory and contextual analysis instead to explain these trends is admirable.

This final finding highlights the growing need to bridge the gap in our sociological explorations of popular support in neopatrimonial and authoritarian states similar to Kazakhstan. Isaacs' contribution to formal and informal politics is an excellent start to improve our understanding of how neopatrimonial systems pervade despite uneven yet existent political resistance. The absence of such data and even special ethnography on genuine party support in specific regions in Kazakhstan constrains the analysis of societal complexities on regional, class and ethnic levels. The field of Central

Eurasian studies would only benefit from more attempts to study party systems and party support from sociological and even ethnographic perspectives, which I hope this book will inspire in the future.

Overall, *Party System Formation in Kazakhstan* is an invaluable contribution to the study of Central Asian politics as well as for the wider field of political science. It provides a very detailed and coherent analysis of contemporary Kazakhstani political development and should become a key book for students and researchers of contemporary Central Asia.

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