

## **Pursuing the Dream of Democracy: Understanding Election Processes in Kazakhstan in Light of Electoral Reforms**

### **Novel Case in the History of Kazakhstan Elections**

In September 2022, the suburban village of Koyandy of the Tselinograd District in the Akmola Region, Kazakhstan, saw a novel case in the history of elections in the country. For what appeared to be one of the first times in the nation's election history, repeat elections were held due to contestation of the initial election results. Further, the court ruled that election protocol violations occurred in the initial election.

On behalf of a candidate Khasamkhan Khavdzhalil running for Akim<sup>1</sup> in Koyandy, an agent filed a formal legal suit challenging the procedures of Koyandy's precinct election commission, in particular those for polling stations #653 and #739. It was alleged that the election protocols were not followed properly, which led to the candidate Bakytzhan Soltanbay winning the election on 28 August 2022. According to the Akimat<sup>2</sup> of the Tselinograd District, as reported by the election monitoring organisation Erkindik Qanaty, the winner won by a plurality of 29% with 190 votes out of 661 cast.

According to Erkindik Qanaty, protocol violations which were mentioned in the court documents included having too many members of the commission at the polling stations (11 members where the rules allowed five to seven people), a mismatch between the factual number of voters and the numbers stated in the protocols (the difference was 93 ballots for polling station #653 and 10 ballots for polling station #739), and violation of the vote-counting procedure.<sup>3</sup> Allegedly, members of the precinct election commission positioned themselves around the table in a way that blocked the view of the observers and authorised representatives.

In what was considered surprising for Kazakhstan, the Specialised Interdistrict Administrative Court of the Akmola Region ruled on 2 September 2022 in favour of the challenging candidate. The original election results were declared invalid and annulled.<sup>4</sup> This led to a repeat of the Akim election in

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<sup>1</sup> Akims are the governors of regions, districts, cities and villages in Kazakhstan.

<sup>2</sup> Akimats are the offices of the Akims and the primary executive bodies of the areas they are responsible for.

<sup>3</sup> Erkindik Qanaty, "Re-Elections in Koyandy: How An Activist Won a Case Against the TEC," *Instagram*, September 28, 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CjCuP6PqmEu/?igsh=MTNkdnlvDU1MGc5ZQ%3D%3D&img\\_index=9](https://www.instagram.com/p/CjCuP6PqmEu/?igsh=MTNkdnlvDU1MGc5ZQ%3D%3D&img_index=9).

<sup>4</sup> Judicial decision, Administrative Procedural and Process-Related Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan (APPC), September 2, 2022, court documents, <https://office.sud.kz/act/4c75b28b-d196-4f96-a652-cd64d1b7c620>.

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*This case study was written by Dr Rashimah Rajah, University of Twente, the Netherlands, and Dr Clifford Wentworth Frasier, Graduate School of Public Policy, Nazarbayev University. The authors would like to acknowledge Aizhan Arshabayeva, Aidana Issaliyeva, Alikhan Kuserbayev, and Aliya Mustafina for their assistance in this case study. The case study does not reflect the views of the organisations nor is it intended to suggest correct or incorrect handling of the situation depicted. The case study is not intended to serve as a primary source of data and is meant solely for class discussion.*

Koyandy on 25 September 2022. In the re-run, the candidate previously declared the winner, Soltanbay, won and was installed as Akim.

While the repeat election still led to the original winner to be appointed Akim, this case study raises the critical question: Why did a judicial challenge emerge in a setting within an authoritative political framework where competitive elections are rare?

### **Government in Kazakhstan**

Kazakhstan is a relatively young country, declaring independence on 16 December 1991. Despite its young age, the country has tried to significantly raise its level of democracy. The government is made up of the executive branch (President, Prime Minister, and ministers and governors, also known as Akims), legislative branch (lower house known as Mazhilis and upper house Senate), and judicial branch (courts handling general jurisdiction, crimes, administrative offenses, as well as a recently established Constitutional Court).

Kazakhstan is divided into 17 regions and the three municipal regions of Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent. Each of these regions is headed by a provincial governor (Akim) traditionally appointed by the President. The ruling party, Amanat (previously known as Nur Otan), has dominated Kazakhstan's politics since the party's founding in 1999.

Maslikhats are councils of elected deputies on the regional, district or city levels. Governors of regions (ie "oblasts") are paired with a maslikhat, as are Akims of a district (which are within a region). "Third-tier" towns,<sup>5</sup> such as the village Koyandy mentioned above, do not have a maslikhat. However, regardless of its tier, each town is administered by its own Akim.

### **Electoral Reforms in Kazakhstan**

Electoral competitiveness refers to the degree of uncertainty in an election outcome.<sup>6</sup> Often used as an indicator of democracy, it encompasses not only whether elections are contested, but also the conditions that make those contests genuinely competitive.<sup>7</sup> Competitiveness depends on the extent to which there is a "genuine battleground", where incumbents remove barriers or refrain from manipulating conditions such as voter rolls, barring voters from polling stations, or committing electoral fraud.<sup>8</sup> Electoral fraud involves the introduction of bias into the administration of elections, and can occur during various stages of the electoral process.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For a more comprehensive overview of the government structure in Kazakhstan, refer to Annex A.

<sup>6</sup> Axel Cronert and Pär Nyman, "A General Approach to Measuring Electoral Competitiveness for Parties and Governments," *Political Analysis* 29 no. 3 (2021): 337-355.

<sup>7</sup> Gary W. Cox, Jon H. Fiva, and Daniel M. Smith, "Measuring the Competitiveness of Elections," *Political Analysis* 28 no. 2 (2020): 168-185.

<sup>8</sup> Andreas Schedler, "Elections Without Democracy: The Menu of Manipulation," *Journal of Democracy* 13 iss. 2 (2002): 36-50.

<sup>9</sup> Schedler, "Elections Without Democracy."

Scholars emphasise that to increase electoral competitiveness requires viable political alternatives, equitable access to media and resources, and independent electoral authorities.<sup>10</sup> These conditions encourage a more level playing field, such that voters can make genuine, consequential choices. In Kazakhstan, several reforms were enacted in recent years to increase electoral competitiveness by lowering barriers to participation, increasing the range of choices on voters' ballots, and making structural changes toward decentralisation of decision-making.

A number of the electoral reforms were put in place after protests in January 2022 when citizens were unhappy about the sudden sharp increase in fuel prices after the lifting of a government-enforced price cap.<sup>11</sup> Despite starting peacefully, the protests turned violent, with the death of over 200 people. Known as the January Events or Bloody January, these protests were also fuelled by deeper frustrations over corruption and inequality in Kazakhstan.<sup>12</sup> Although an academic study showed that income inequality itself was not a significant factor in protest actions, but rather, the depth of poverty in certain areas of Kazakhstan,<sup>13</sup> these protests highlighted the importance of having the government understand the *perception* of inequality among voters. Reforms were rolled out at both levels for (i) parliamentary elections, and (ii) Akim elections.

## ***Initial Reforms***

### ***Parliamentary Elections***

Prior to the events of 2022, there were initial attempts at increasing electoral competitiveness. For example, in 2020, the minimum number of members required to register a political party was reduced from 40,000 to 20,000<sup>14</sup> – a reform intended to lower barriers to entry and encourage the formation of new political organisations. By easing registration requirements, the government sought to broaden political participation and diversify the pool of contesting parties, theoretically creating a more pluralistic and competitive electoral environment. This was in line with President Tokayev's stated objective of building a "listening state" that responded to citizens' needs.<sup>15</sup>

Legislative elections to the Mazhilis under the presidency of Tokayev were held for the first time in January 2021, with the hopes for different parties to enter the parliament. However, despite

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> "Timeline: January Tragedy in Kazakhstan," *Kazakhstan Today*, January 16, 2022, [https://www.kt.kz/eng/society/chronology\\_of\\_the\\_january\\_tragedy\\_in\\_kazakhstan\\_1377927776.html](https://www.kt.kz/eng/society/chronology_of_the_january_tragedy_in_kazakhstan_1377927776.html).

<sup>12</sup> Shaun Walker, "Kazakhstan Unrest: What are the Protests About?," *The Guardian*, January 6, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/06/kazakhstan-unrest-what-are-the-protests-about>.

<sup>13</sup> Bulat Mukhamediyev, Laila Bimendiyeva, Galiya Dauliyeva, and Zhansaya Temerbulatova, "Unrest in Kazakhstan: Economic Background and Causes," *Cogent Economics & Finance* 11 (2023): 2263305, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322039.2023.2263305>.

<sup>14</sup> "Senate Adopts Law Alleviating Requirements to Political Parties," *Kazakh Telegraph Agency*, May 21, 2020, <https://kaztag.kz/en/news/senate-adopts-law-alleviating-requirements-to-political-parties>.

<sup>15</sup> Bakhytzhon Kurmanov, Urazgali Selteyev, and Anuar Almaganbetov, "'Listening State?': Exploring Citizens' Perceptions of Open Government in Tokayev's Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Survey* 43 iss. 2 (2024): 235-256.

expectations, other contesting parties failed to enter the parliament, as they did not reach the minimum threshold of 7% of total votes.<sup>16</sup>

In May 2021, the electoral threshold for political parties to enter the parliament was lowered from 7% to 5%.<sup>17</sup> The option “voting against all” or “none of the above” was re-introduced to provide citizens more options at the ballot box.<sup>18</sup> This allowed for voters’ genuine choices to be accounted for, a dimension of electoral competitiveness as mentioned earlier.

### *Akim Elections*

In May 2021, the parliament also passed a series of bills that allowed independent and nominated candidates to run for municipal elections.<sup>19</sup> Previously, district and village-level Akims were “elected” by maslikhats, but were essentially nominated by higher-level Akims – with no citizen participation. The new laws in 2021 allowed citizens to vote for third-tier or rural Akims (in villages, towns, and small settlements with up to 2,000 residents) directly.<sup>20</sup>

Guidelines were added regarding candidacy for rural Akims: the candidates must be a Kazakhstan citizen of at least 25 years old and meet the qualification requirements in accordance with the legislation on civil service.<sup>21</sup> Elections were later expanded to include Akims of districts and cities of regional significance. However, as of October 2025, Akims of the three largest cities (Almaty, Astana and Shymkent) were not yet elected, nor were Akims of entire regions.

### ***Reforms Of and Beyond 2022***

Despite the reforms announced since 2020, such as reducing the barriers to form a political party, the composition of the newly elected parliament in 2021 remained almost the same as that of the 2016 elections. The ruling party retained its super-majority control of the Mazhilis. Protests in 2022 signalled citizens’ dissatisfaction with the status quo.<sup>22</sup> Thus, further steps were taken to encourage decentralisation as part of a national reform programme to improve electoral systems in Kazakhstan. Before 2022, Kazakhstan observed a super-presidential system, where the President controlled the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the government. In June 2022, a national referendum to modify Kazakhstan’s constitution was held, which passed with 77% of the vote. Voter turnout was

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<sup>16</sup> “Election Guide: Republic of Kazakhstan, Election for Mazhilis (Kazakh House of Representatives) 2012,” International Foundation for Electoral Systems, last modified June 21, 2024, <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/513/>.

<sup>17</sup> “New Law on Elections Aims to Engage Kazakh Citizens in Political Institutions, Experts Say,” *The Astana Times*, May 25, 2021, <https://astanatimes.com/2021/05/new-law-on-elections-aims-to-engage-kazakh-citizens-in-political-institutions-experts-say/>.

<sup>18</sup> “Kazakhstan Senate Passes Voting Reform to Give Citizenry More Options at Ballot Box,” *The Astana Times*, May 25, 2021, <https://astanatimes.com/2021/05/kazakh-senate-votes-to-return-against-all-option-to-voting-ballots/>.

<sup>19</sup> “Kazakhstan Passes New Election Participation Law,” *EU Reporter Correspondent*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.eureporter.co/world/kazakhstan/2021/05/25/kazakhstan-passes-new-election-participation-law/>.

<sup>20</sup> EU Reporter Correspondent, “Kazakhstan Passes New Election Participation Law.”

<sup>21</sup> EU Reporter Correspondent, “Kazakhstan Passes New Election Participation Law.”

<sup>22</sup> Diana T. Kudaibergenova and Marlene Laruelle, “Making Sense of the January 2022 Protests in Kazakhstan: Failing Legitimacy, Culture of Protests, and Elite Readjustments,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 38 iss. 6 (2022): 441-459.

68%.<sup>23</sup> This result supported the creation of a Constitutional Court, which can in cases of dispute, decide on the correctness of holding presidential as well as parliamentary elections.<sup>24</sup> The presidential term was changed. Where the President previously could serve two consecutive five-year terms, the tenure was reduced to a single, non-renewable seven-year term.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the President should not, on paper, be affiliated with any political party during his/her tenure.<sup>26</sup>

### *Parliamentary Elections*

The minimum number of members required to register a political party was further dropped from 20,000 to 5,000. The minimum number of people affiliated with the office of a regional political party was also reduced, so that regional parties could be registered and maintained at lower cost.<sup>27</sup> These steps were aimed at giving more voice to the regional and local levels.

In March 2023, early elections for the Mazhilis and the local legislative bodies were conducted. Self-nominated candidates were allowed to stand in single-mandate districts.<sup>28</sup> Several candidates ran as independents. Voters were given the option to vote against all parties or candidates. Voter turnout was 53%.<sup>29</sup> Nearly 30% of the seats went to candidates elected in single-mandate districts and 70% of the seats went to parties under the proportional system.<sup>30</sup> Despite several hurdles, the elections for the Mazhilis in March 2023 were the freest in the country's history and represented a "vital step for Kazakhstan's democratisation and political pluralism".<sup>31</sup>

### *Akim Elections*

The plan to roll out Akim elections envisioned eventual elections in the big cities. Where initially only voters in third-tier towns and communities were allowed to vote for their Akims, over several years this franchise was expanded to citizens voting for Akims at various levels of government. Residents elected Akims in 42 districts and three cities.<sup>32</sup> This "step-by-step democratisation of local governance",

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<sup>23</sup> "Election Guide: Republic of Kazakhstan, Kazakh Referendum 2022," International Foundation for Electoral Systems, August 2, 2023, <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3955/>.

<sup>24</sup> "Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan," Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (n.d.), <https://www.akorda.kz/en/constitution-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-50912>.

<sup>25</sup> "Kazakhstan Limits Presidential Term, Renames Capital," *Al Jazeera*, September 17, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/17/kazakhstan-limits-presidential-term-renames-capital>.

<sup>26</sup> Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan."

<sup>27</sup> James Wilson, "Kazakhstan's Political Development," *EU Political Report*, 2023, <https://eupoliticalreport.com/kazakhstans-political-development/>.

<sup>28</sup> "Election Observation Mission: Republic of Kazakhstan – Early Parliamentary Elections, 19 March 2023: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions," Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/2/539273.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> "Election Guide: Republic of Kazakhstan, Election for Mazhilis (Kazakh House of Representatives) 2023 General," International Foundation for Electoral Systems, last modified July 11, 2023, <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/4078/>.

<sup>30</sup> International Foundation for Electoral Systems, "Election Guide: Republic of Kazakhstan, Election for Mazhilis (Kazakh House of Representatives) 2023 General."

<sup>31</sup> Ariel Cohen, "Kazakhstan's Parliamentary Elections Affect Energy Flows From Eurasia," *Forbes*, March 23, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielcohen/2023/03/23/kazakhstans-parliamentary-elections-affect-energy-flows-from-eurasia/>.

<sup>32</sup> Aibarshyn Akhmetkali, "From Governance to Economics and Welfare: Key Points from Tokayev's 2022-2024 Reforms," *The Astana Times*, March 16, 2025, <https://astanatimes.com/2025/03/from-governance-to-economics-and-welfare-key-points-from-tokayevs-2022-2024-reforms/>.

from villages to districts and cities, was designed to increase citizens' influence over the development of their areas, and also to enhance the accountability of Akims, who were directly elected in their jurisdictions.<sup>33</sup>

### **Challenges with Electoral Reforms**

Despite hopeful steps in increasing democracy and electoral competitiveness through official reforms (see Annex B), issues arose when attempting to enact the changes into practice. Independent candidates reported facing bureaucratic resistance and informal pressure.<sup>34</sup> There were disproportionate sanctions for campaign and campaign finance violations, limitations to the right to stand and the suffrage rights of persons with disabilities, as well as shortcomings related to the transparency of campaign finance and publication of disaggregated election results.<sup>35</sup>

There were also discrepancies observed between law and practice. For instance, by law, political parties may nominate a maximum of one person per election commission. However, several Territorial Elections Commissions and District Election Commissions visited by civil society organisations had in practice more than one member affiliated with Amanat. The restrictive legal framework also tended to deter independent critical reporting.<sup>36</sup>

The Election Law allowed for de-registration of candidates for any violation of campaign and campaign finance rules. For example, three candidates who opted to fundraise in order to secure the funds for the high deposit amount (1,050,000 Kazakhstan Tenge, about 2,165 Euros) were prosecuted, fined and subsequently de-registered as such fundraising was qualified by the courts as early campaigning.<sup>37</sup> In total, 54 candidates were deregistered, seven of whom for early campaigning. However, in a positive development, judicial remedies were provided in several cases on candidate nomination and registration, restoring eligible candidates.<sup>38</sup>

### **Public Opinion**

Following the electoral reforms, Kazakhstan has seen thousands of local elections for Akims. However, most of these remain lopsided, that is, there is no real competition. Even though data recovered from election commission websites indicated that around 10% of contests might be competitive, defined by a margin of victory under 55%,<sup>39</sup> academic observers of Kazakhstan politics as well as a former member of Kazakhstan's Mazhilis warned against trusting election commission reports.

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<sup>33</sup> Akhmetkali, "From Governance to Economics and Welfare."

<sup>34</sup> Aliya Mustafina, Zhibek Akimova, and Daniyar Baimagambetov, "The State of Local Democracy: Do Maslikhats have Real Power?," *INSIDE Kazakhstan* Issue 5.1, March 4, 2025.

<sup>35</sup> "Election Observation Mission: Republic of Kazakhstan – Early Parliamentary Elections, 19 March 2023," OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/537155>.

<sup>36</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "Election Observation Mission."

<sup>37</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "Election Observation Mission."

<sup>38</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "Election Observation Mission."

<sup>39</sup> Clifford Frasier, *Measures for Local Electoral Competition in Kazakhstan*, [Unpublished manuscript, 2025].

To understand voters' thoughts and attitudes on the effectiveness of the electoral reforms, interviews were conducted with several voters in Kazakhstan. In particular, four residents from the village of Koyandy, who had participated in the Akim election in 2022, were identified and interviewed in August 2025. These interviews gathered their perception of competitiveness in the Koyandy Akim election, and highlighted possible reasons for it.

The suburban village of Koyandy is located in the Tselinograd District within the Akmola Region, 10 kilometres northeast of the highway encircling the city of Astana, Kazakhstan's capital. Both official and informal actions contributed to the suburb's growth. For instance, in 2004 authorities enlarged Koyandy's boundaries by 96 hectares to settle families<sup>40</sup> from countries such as Mongolia, China, Russia and Uzbekistan. In the following years, some incoming settlers bypassed legal procedures to build houses on unauthorised land. Koyandy's population grew, from an estimated 2,954 persons in 2009<sup>41</sup> to an estimated 33,000 persons by 2022<sup>42</sup> when the contested election took place. Most employed residents of Koyandy commute to Astana for work, and a bus line connects the suburb to the capital city.

### ***Electoral Competitiveness in Koyandy***

These interviews suggested that the election was competitive: interviewees clearly remembered the participation of multiple candidates. One voter remembered six candidates and could still name three: Soltanbay, Khavdzhalel, as well as Areikhan Berdenbek, who later was elevated to the regional maslikhat. This citizen's impression of a wide field of contenders was expressed in their statement that "everyone came to Koyandy and offered their candidacy". Another voter remembered the involvement of four candidates, while others talked about "multiple candidates" and could identify the top two by name: Soltanbay and Khavdzhalel. This anecdotal evidence implied that in Koyandy the electoral reforms enabled citizen participation and emboldened a meaningful number of individuals to run as candidates.

### ***Voter Considerations: Efforts of Candidates***

Through the availability of choices, voters reported that their decisions were influenced by the level of effort candidates demonstrated in engaging with the electorate. The respondents specifically recalled that the two leading candidates were particularly active in reaching out to voters. For instance, one interviewee explained that "our focus was only with those two because they were approaching residents, reaching out and talking about their proposed programmes." Another interviewee noted that Soltanbay, the prevailing candidate, engaged with wider audiences by granting interviews, but minor candidates had failed to do so. The voters' accounts indicated candidates had offered policy proposals that on the one hand were common, most notably to improve basic infrastructure like roads and water supply, while on the other hand offered competing ideas on more niche topics. For instance,

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<sup>40</sup> Nurtai Lakhanuly, "A Land Scandal is Brewing in Koyandy," *Radio Azattyq*, November 5, 2014, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/koyandy-zemlya-oralmany/26675995.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Archives of the Ministry of Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan

<sup>42</sup> Sanat Urnaliev, "Koyandy. How People Survive in the Suburbs of Astana," *Informburo.kz*, October 6, 2022, [https://informburo.kz/fotoreportazh/koyandy-kak-vyzivayut-lyudi-v-prigorode-astany\\_1664967124](https://informburo.kz/fotoreportazh/koyandy-kak-vyzivayut-lyudi-v-prigorode-astany_1664967124).

Soltanbay proposed building a sports complex in contrast to other candidates proposing to build an ethno-village. This pointed to the heightened ability of voters to exercise an authentic and informed choice, demonstrating a link between the new reforms and electoral competitiveness in Koyandy.

### ***Opinions on Electoral Competitiveness***

Even though voters were not asked to assess whether it was good for Koyandy to experience a contested election, interestingly all voters who granted interviews made a point to share their perspective that the political competition had been positive for their community. These citizens affirmed the competitiveness for different reasons. The contestation: (i) helped citizens better understand the general mechanics of elections including their basic right to choose between candidates; (ii) created the chance for the strongest candidate to win; and (iii) contributed to increased trust in the democratic process. On this last point, a voter who was interviewed said:

*There were doubts about how the elections would be conducted, as it was the first time they were held...I noticed that there was a concern in society: how will it be? Will it be fair? Or will it be something else? We heard the results...and we heard there would be a re-election. Then we voted again, and again it was decided to be the same person. So it was fair.*

The interviewees acknowledged the court case that had triggered the re-election but without offering further comment. However, to the extent they remembered the role of the court, there was a sense that something generally positive had happened. The voter who spoke most clearly on this during the interviews said the case showed that people had the right to defend their rights and elaborated:

*I believe that in our country there is an opportunity to defend one's civil rights in court, and this is a democratic achievement of our state.*

The same interviewee who was interested in how competition contributed to candidate strength seemed to think that the court case had amplified competition which was positive because “if the election is based just in the clan network, then a truly strong candidate may not be able to win.”

The main question posed to interviewees was: “Why was there so much competition for the office of Akim?”

### ***Opportunity Meets Electoral Reforms***

The position of Akim became “open” in the summer of 2022 because the incumbent, who had served as Akim under the previous system of centralised appointment, did not compete. Although circumstantial, this opening created an opportunity or momentum to reap the positive effects of the electoral reforms. This open seat therefore could have encouraged a larger number to declare candidacy and contend for the role.

Further, electoral rules allowed candidates to run whose registered addresses were outside of the Koyandy village district – what one interviewee called “external candidates.” In fact, of the eight candidates on the ballot, only three were registered residents of Koyandy. Soltanbay, the candidate eventually declared Akim after winning 44% (according to the Tselinograd District Election

Commission) of the re-election vote was an “internal candidate.” However, his main challenger Khavdzhalé who litigated the election prior to receiving 40% of the rematch vote (according to the Election Commission), was an “external candidate”.

From the above indications, one could contemplate the reformed electoral rules had raised the likelihood of electoral competition in Koyandy. Rules such as term limits that enable open-seat contests, and rules that widen the field of eligible candidates might plausibly promote competition.

### ***Other Factors***

#### *Attitudes Toward the Administrative Status Quo*

Beyond electoral reforms, there were other factors that could contribute to the emergence of electoral competitiveness. Interviewees mentioned repeatedly public dissatisfaction with the administrative status quo in Koyandy in 2022. They mentioned especially problems with roads and the water supply, and also raised issues with inadequate streetlights, poor electrical connection to houses, lack of access to internet, and the need for public landscaping. One interviewee said: “The village had a lot of problems from the very beginning, roads and infrastructure, there were no lights, we sat with candles...” As such, there was an opening for a new candidate to step in and make positive changes to the status quo.

In political studies, dissatisfaction with the status quo can raise the salience of issues to the top of a jurisdiction’s policy agenda.<sup>43</sup> This means, voters are interested in candidates who are able to tackle these issues (such as with roads and the water supply). Therefore, in times when satisfaction is relatively low and the public mood is negative, incumbents may be less likely to run to regain their office<sup>44</sup> leaving an open seat that encourages competitors to run.<sup>45</sup> While again circumstantial, this attestation, combined with the new electoral rules, provided an opportunity for electoral competition where voters were allowed to make informed choices based on merit of candidates.

#### *Demographic Factors*

Another antecedent to competition in Koyandy could be sociological attributes specific to the village. Interviewees pointed out that persons who had recently moved to the suburb formed the large majority of Koyandy. One interviewee termed the newcomers as “new settlers”. The background of the new settlers could be equally meaningful. One voter, when asked about what factors had contributed to the electoral competition, responded: “There are a lot of Kandas who came from abroad” and elaborated that Kandas are likely to evaluate candidates on their work ethic rather than on other characteristics. Other interviewees echoed this sentiment by suggesting Koyandy’s voters were prepared to elect the most hard-working person.

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<sup>43</sup> For example, see: Stuart N. Soroka, “Good News and Bad News: Asymmetric Responses to Economic Information,” *Journal of Politics* 68 iss. 2 (2006): 372-385.

<sup>44</sup> Jennifer Wolak, “Strategic Retirements: The Influence of Public Preferences on Voluntary Departures from Congress,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 32 iss. 2 (2007): 285-308.

<sup>45</sup> Michael P. Olson and Andrew R. Stone, “The Incumbency Advantage in Judicial Elections: Evidence from Partisan Trial Court Elections in Six US States,” *Political Behavior* 45 iss. 4 (2023): 1333-1354.

The term Kandas – which means “compatriot” or literally “same-blood” – refers to Kazakhs born abroad and who are repatriated back to Kazakhstan. The Kazakhstan national government offers programmes, such as relocation centres for Kandas that provide residency and relocation services, that have assisted thousands from neighbouring countries such as China, Mongolia, Uzbekistan and Russia to gain Kazakhstan citizenship and settle in Kazakhstan. The suburb of Koyandy was known for being primarily a Kandas settlement.<sup>46</sup> Both of the leading candidates in Koyandy’s Akim election were Kandas, as were at least three out of four of the voters interviewed.

The interviews conducted were able to surface only the possibility that the nature of Koyandy’s major constituency – newly arrived Kandas – might have something to do with the electoral competition. More interviews would be needed to explore this possibility and to shed more light on how the factor could matter. Certainly, Koyandy’s demographics contribute to its uniqueness as a case.

### **Lessons from Mexico**

In understanding the effects that electoral reforms have on democratic processes in a country, we can examine the case of Mexico, an authoritarian regime that witnessed various electoral reforms over the past few decades. Mexico was long regarded as an authoritarian regime because of the monopoly that the ruling party, Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI), had on important electoral victories.<sup>47</sup> Especially under the long presidency of Porfirio Díaz, from 1876 to 1911, Mexico was described to be under a dictatorship as dissent was often suppressed and the President held onto power through rigged elections and a centralised system of government.<sup>48</sup>

Mexico implemented various electoral reforms in recent decades, such as the Political Reform Law of 1977 legalising previously banned opposition parties and introducing proportional representation in Congress, and the establishment and independence of the Federal Electoral Institute in the 1990s. Mexico gradually transitioned to democracy, with the end of the PRI’s one-party rule in 2000 marking a significant shift.<sup>49</sup> Further reforms followed in the 2000s with the regulation of state intervention in political parties’ internal affairs, the standardisation of federal and local legislation on political parties, and the creation of the National Electoral Institute which replaced the Federal Electoral Institute. Although there are ongoing debates about the strength of democratic institutions in the country, Mexico is now a multi-party democracy. Annex G chronicles the timeline of key milestones.

In Mexico, numerous reforms were in place over several decades for a transition most regarded as towards multi-party democracy. They were also typically in response to country-wide protests following controversial elections. Yet, critics argued that the transition from an authoritarian regime

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<sup>46</sup> Urnaliev, “Koyandy. How People Survive in the Suburbs of Astana.”

<sup>47</sup> Frank Brandenburg, *The Making of Modern Mexico*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1964).

<sup>48</sup> Jorge Gerardo Flores-Díaz, “A Brief Review of the History of Reforms to the Legal Regulations of Political Parties in Mexico,” *Mexican Law Review* 14 iss. 2 (2022): 83-103.

<sup>49</sup> Beatriz Magaloni, “The Demise of Mexico’s One-Party Dominant Regime,” in *The Third Wave of Democratization in Latin America: Advances and Setbacks*, ed. Frances Hagopian and Scott P. Mainwaring (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 121-146.

to an electoral democracy had led to political instability,<sup>50</sup> with a weakening party system,<sup>51</sup> attempts to de-legitimise INE,<sup>52</sup> and judicial reforms which saw a voter turnout of only 13% for the 2025 judicial elections.<sup>53</sup>

## **Lessons for Kazakhstan**

The case study of Mexico provides valuable lessons for Kazakhstan, in that a transition to democracy is possible through institutional reforms, consensus-forming, and resolve from relevant stakeholders. There are four lessons that Kazakhstan can learn from Mexico.

### **A. Institutional Independence is Key**

The creation of an autonomous electoral body (the National Electoral Institute, previously the Federal Electoral Institute) was a turning point for the democratic progress of the country. Over the years, it gained complete independence from branches of the government, thereby increasing voter confidence and trust in the fairness of electoral processes.

### **B. Gradual, Consensus-Based Reforms Build Legitimacy**

The most successful reforms were negotiated across party lines. This meant that they were more broadly accepted and thus more resilient to potential changes. For Kazakhstan, this could mean avoiding top-down, single-party reform packages, and instead engaging in multi-stakeholder dialogue – including opposition parties, civil society and academia – to increase trust and legitimacy.

### **C. Clear Electoral Rules That Prevent Dominance of the Ruling Party**

Other than reforms that may appear to increase democracy “on the surface level”, care could be taken to ensure fairness of the playing field – including rules regarding deregistration, judicial remedies, funding advantages, or control of the state media.

### **D. The Importance of Voter Engagement**

Voters need to be educated and involved – perhaps through civic education campaigns – to be more engaged in elections. In the unprecedented 2025 judicial elections in Mexico, voters did not seem to understand or value the reform, resulting in a low voter turnout. Subsequently, voters need to be confident that their votes will legitimately count toward making important decisions for the country.

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<sup>50</sup> Jorge Arturo Álvarez Tovar, “Why Has the Transition to Democracy Led the Mexican Presidential System to Political Instability? A Proposal to Enhance Institutional Arrangements,” *Mexican Law Review* 5 iss. 2 (2013): 277-304.

<sup>51</sup> Aldo F. Ponce, “The Weakening of the Mexican Party System: The Rise of AMLO’s MORENA,” in *Political Parties and the Crisis of Democracy: Organization, Resilience, and Reform*, ed. Thomas Poguntke and Wilhelm Hofmeister, (Oxford University Press, 2024), 289-309.

<sup>52</sup> Valerie Wirtschafter and Arturo Sarukhan, “Commentary: Mexico Takes Another Step Toward Its Authoritarian Past,” *Brookings Institution*, March 16, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/mexico-takes-another-step-toward-its-authoritarian-past/>.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Graham, “Mexican President Hails ‘Complete Success’ After Just 13% Vote in Judicial Elections,” *The Guardian*, June 2, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/02/mexico-judicial-election-claudia-sheinbaum>.

In Kazakhstan, this also means ensuring that the voters perceive that elections are conducted fairly. According to the primary and secondary research conducted, it is important to ensure that electoral procedures are transparent and implemented according to law to increase perceptions of fairness of the elections. When voters perceive that procedures are just, they are more likely to be engaged and turn up on election day.

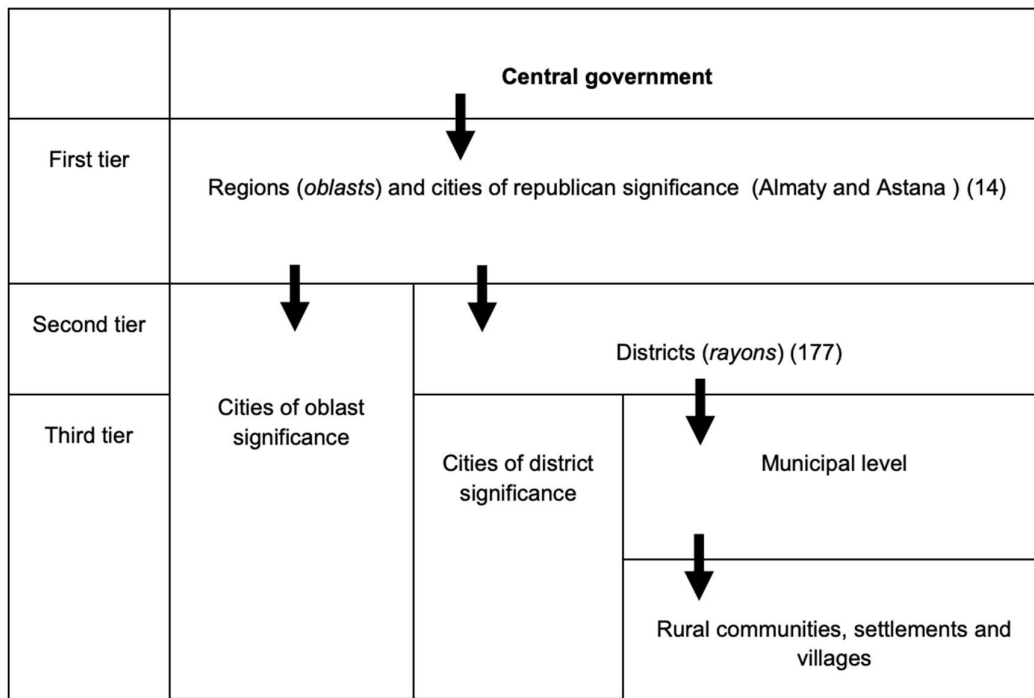
### **Closing Remarks**

In recent years, Kazakhstan has introduced electoral reforms to create a more open political system. Although attempts to improve the electoral system entail challenges, this case study provides a deeper understanding of the election process in light of electoral reforms.

As Kazakhstan is a relatively young country, designing and implementing various reforms will understandably take time. By providing judicial remedies, such as in the case in Koyandy highlighted in this case study, efforts have been made to increase voter and candidates' confidence in effective electoral competition. While the nation is making positive steps, it should be careful to avoid pitfalls observed in other transitioned countries such as Mexico. With active involvement from the government, voters, and independent bodies, democracy does not necessarily have to be a "dream" that is out of reach.

**Annex A**

The Territorial Sub-National Government in Kazakhstan<sup>54</sup>



<sup>54</sup> *Reforming Kazakhstan: Progress, Challenges and Opportunities*, OECD Project Insights, 2018,  
[https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2018/04/reforming-kazakhstan\\_c71ae50f/18ba0d60-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2018/04/reforming-kazakhstan_c71ae50f/18ba0d60-en.pdf).

**Annex B**

Key Milestones in Kazakhstan's Electoral Reforms

Timeline	Event / Electoral Reform
2020	<u>Presidential Address on Political Reforms</u> President Tokayev announced intentions to reform the political system, including enhancing party competition, decentralising power, and improving electoral processes. The minimum number of members required to register a political party was reduced from 40,000 to 20,000.
January 2021	<u>Mazhilis (House of Representatives) Election</u> Legislative elections to the Mazhilis under the presidency of Tokayev were held for the first time in January 2021. Despite some expectations, other contesting parties failed to enter the parliament, as they did not reach the threshold of 7%.
May 2021	<u>Law on Amendments to Election Legislation</u> The party threshold to enter the Mazhilis was lowered from 7% to 5%. The "voting against all" option was reintroduced on ballots. Citizens were allowed to vote in rural Akims directly. Self-nomination for rural Akim candidates was allowed. Candidate eligibility for rural elections was regulated.
July 2021	<u>Direct Elections of Rural Akims Implemented</u> Municipal elections were held for the first time. Most of the positions went to incumbents from the ruling party.
2022	<u>Various Electoral Reforms</u> Following the January 2022 unrest, more new laws were introduced. In June 2022, a national referendum to modify Kazakhstan's constitution was held, which passed with 77% of the vote. The president was limited to a single, non-renewable seven-year term. The minimum number of members required to register a political party was further dropped from 20,000 to 5,000. A mixed electoral system for Mazhilis was introduced, which included proportional representation and single-mandate districts.
2022	<u>Court Case for Koyandy Elections</u> The election procedures were contested in Koyandy, which led to a re-election on 25 September 2022. In the re-run, the candidate previously declared the winner, Soltanbay, won and was installed as Akim. The court case marked a significant positive step in promoting fairness in elections for competing candidates.
2023	<u>Early Elections for Mazhilis and expansion of direct election of Akims</u> In March, snap elections were held for the Mazhilis and nearly 30% of seats went to candidates elected in single-mandate districts. Several candidates ran as independents and 70% of the seats went to parties under the proportional system. These elections were termed the "freest" in the country's history. Also in 2023, residents directly elected Akims in 42 districts and 3 cities.
2024	<u>Referendum 2024</u> On 6 October 2024, Kazakhstan held a referendum on constructing a nuclear power plant. 71% of the voters agreed to the construction of a nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan. Voter turnout was 64%. <sup>55</sup>
Present	<u>Step-by-Step Decentralisation</u> Kazakhstan takes positive steps at achieving electoral competitiveness and democracy. However, there remains significant challenges to be overcome.

<sup>55</sup> "Election Guide: Republic of Kazakhstan, Kazakh Referendum 2024," International Foundation for Electoral Systems, May 19, 2025, <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/4486/>.

**Annex C**

**A Map of the Koyandy Electoral District<sup>56</sup>**



Note: The aerial view of Koyandy highlights issues with the roads in the district.

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<sup>56</sup> Google Maps. *Koyandy Kazakhstan*.

[https://www.google.com/maps/place/020000+Koyandy,+Kazakhstan/@51.2795525,71.6251515,4848m/data=!3m2!1e3!4b1!4m6!3m5!1s0x424f87161696a3e3:0x527646d229c0b771!8m2!3d51.2780073!4d71.6514646!16s%2Fg%2F124xw8lj?entry=ttu&g\\_ep=EgoyMDI1MTAwNy4wIKXMDSoASAFQAw%3D%3D](https://www.google.com/maps/place/020000+Koyandy,+Kazakhstan/@51.2795525,71.6251515,4848m/data=!3m2!1e3!4b1!4m6!3m5!1s0x424f87161696a3e3:0x527646d229c0b771!8m2!3d51.2780073!4d71.6514646!16s%2Fg%2F124xw8lj?entry=ttu&g_ep=EgoyMDI1MTAwNy4wIKXMDSoASAFQAw%3D%3D)

**Annex D**

Public Announcements of Koyandy's Akim Elections<sup>57</sup>

**Announcement** on the Appointment of Elections for the Akim of the Village of Tselinograd District on August 28, 2022

In accordance with Article 113-1 of the Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Elections in the Republic of Kazakhstan," and Resolution No. 25/1 of July 29, 2022, of the Tselinograd District Territorial Election Commission "On the Appointment of Elections for the Akim of the Village of Koyandy, Tselinograd District," we hereby announce that elections for

**the Akim of the Village of Koyandy have been scheduled for August 28, 2022.**

Furthermore, the Calendar Plan of main activities for the preparation and conduct of the elections for the Akim of the Village of Koyandy, Tselinograd District, has been approved and published on the official website of the Tselinograd District Akimat.

**District Territorial Election Commission**

**On the Conduct of Repeat Elections for the Akim of Koyandy Village**

In accordance with subparagraph 1) of Article 14 and Article 113-9 of the Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Elections in the Republic of Kazakhstan," and on the basis of the decision of the Specialized Interdistrict Administrative Court of Akmola Region dated September 2, 2022, the ruling of the Judicial Collegium for Administrative Cases of the Akmola Regional Court dated September 8, 2022, and Resolution No. 17/210 of the Regional Election Commission dated September 14, 2022, "On the Annulment of the Protocol of the Tselinograd District Territorial Election Commission on the Results of the Elections of the Akim of Koyandy Village and the Decision on the Registration of the Elected Akim," the Tselinograd District Territorial Election Commission RESOLVES:

1. To conduct repeat elections of the Akim of Koyandy Village on **September 25, 2022**, at the same polling stations No. 653 and No. 739, and according to the same voter lists compiled for the initial elections held on August 28, 2022.
2. To include in the ballot the candidates for Akim of Koyandy Village who were previously registered.
3. To approve the election action plan for the preparation and conduct of the repeat elections, in accordance with the appendix to this resolution.
4. To provide additional training for members of precinct election commissions No. 653 and No. 739.
5. To publish this resolution on the website of the Tselinograd District Territorial Election Commission and in the district newspapers *Vestnik Akmola* and *Esil-Nura*.

**Chairperson of the Election Commission**

Zh. Amanzholova

**Secretary of the Election Commission**

A. Alekseeva

<sup>57</sup> Tselinograd District Election Commission (n.d.), Government website e-Otinish (n.d.), <https://eotinish.kz/>.

**Annex E**

Voter Turnout in Koyandy on 25 September 2022

Koyandy's total population (all ages) in 2022, estimated <sup>58</sup>	Approximately 33,000
Number of citizens registered on the voter list <sup>59</sup>	3,304
Number of citizens who voted on September 25, 2022 <sup>60</sup>	703
<b>Turnout of registered voters:</b>	21.3%

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<sup>58</sup> See footnote #41, Urnaliev, "Koyandy. How People Survive in the Suburbs of Astana."

<sup>59</sup> Tselinograd District Election Commission (n.d.), Government website e-Otinish, <https://eotinish.kz/>.

<sup>60</sup> Tselinograd District Election Commission (n.d.), Government website e-Otinish, <https://eotinish.kz/>.

**Annex F**

Breakdown of Votes Received on 25 September 2022<sup>61</sup>

Candidates for Akim	Year of Birth	Official Residence of Candidate	Votes Received on 25 September 2022	Percentage
Abuov Omar Seytsultanovich	1962	Village of Akmol	1	0.1%
Areikhan Berdenbek	1973	Village of Koyandy	6	0.9%
Boranbayev Sayat Kudaybergenovich	1985	Village of Koyandy	75	10.7%
Kanzhil Shakirt	1967	City of Nur-Sultan	0	0%
Mukatayev Damir Seytkhanovich	1982	City of Nur-Sultan	10	1.4%
Soltanbay Bakyt Khan	1980	Village of Koyandy	308	43.8%
Khabay Berdibek	1980	City of Nur-Sultan	7	1.0%
Khavdzhalel Khasamkhan	1983	Village of Olzhabay Batyr	278	39.5%
Category: "Against all"			4	0.6%
Category: Invalid ballot			14	2.0%
<b>Total</b>			<b>703</b>	<b>100%</b>

<sup>61</sup> Tselinograd District Election Commission (n.d.), Government website e-Otinish, <https://eotinish.kz/>.

**Annex G**

Key Milestones in Mexico's Electoral Reforms

Timeline	Event / Electoral Reform
1946	<u>Increased Barriers to Electoral Participation</u> In 1946, PRI passed the electoral law stating that any political party needed at least 30,000 members, with a minimum of 1,000 members in at least two thirds of the federal entities. This increased requirement for party recognition was passed to prevent the electoral participation of threats to the ruling party. <sup>62</sup>
1977	<u>Political Reform Law (Reforma Política de 1977)</u> The Political Reform Law allowed opposition parties greater legal recognition by loosening the requirements. This reform was aimed to incorporate opposition into the government. It legalised previously banned opposition parties and introduced proportional representation to ensure minority parties could gain seats in Congress. <sup>63</sup>
1990	<u>Federal Electoral Institute (Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE))</u> The Federal Electoral Institute was created in response to widespread criticism of electoral fraud, in particular, the controversial 1988 presidential election. <sup>64</sup> In the 1988 General Elections – the first competitive elections in Mexico since PRI took power in 1929 – saw the PRI tampering the election results to stay in power. This led to numerous rallies in the country, including those by opposition lawmakers in Congress. The IFE was established in October 1990 as an autonomous body to organise federal elections. Although it was initially not fully independent from the government, the IFE took over many election tasks previously controlled by the Minister of Interior, reducing direct governmental control.
1996	<u>Various Electoral Reforms</u> Between 1994 to 1996, there were reforms to remove government officials from the IFE's governing council. The IFE became completely independent in 1996. The Federal Code for Institutions and Electoral Procedures was designed to guarantee a fair process and stress the importance of political parties. <sup>65</sup> Due to the establishment of clearer electoral processes, as well as through sanctioning and legitimising election results, more parties made up the Chamber of Deputies. <sup>66</sup> The Federal Electoral Tribunal was established to resolve disputes arising from the electoral process, further contributing to the perception of fairness and accountability in elections in Mexico. <sup>67</sup> The 1996 reform also increased public funding for political parties. This was aimed to benefit the PRI with a reliable source of income should the party lose power. <sup>68</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Joseph L. Klesner, "Electoral Reform in Mexico's Hegemonic Party System: Perpetuation of Privilege or Democratic Advance?," presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., 28-31 August 1997.

<sup>63</sup> Flores-Díaz, "A Brief Review of the History of Reforms."

<sup>64</sup> Dylan McNally, "Mexico's National Electoral Institute: Ensuring Fair Elections at the Local Level," Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, June 30, 2014.

<sup>65</sup> "Electoral Reform in Mexico," ACE Project: The Electoral Knowledge Network (n.d.), [https://aceproject.org/main/english/lf/lfy\\_mx.htm](https://aceproject.org/main/english/lf/lfy_mx.htm).

<sup>66</sup> Tovar, "Why Has the Transition to Democracy?"

<sup>67</sup> Susana Berruecos, "Electoral Justice in Mexico: The Role of the Electoral Tribunal Under New Federalism," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 35 no. 4 (2003): 801-825.

<sup>68</sup> Flores-Díaz, "A Brief Review of the History of Reforms."

Timeline	Event / Electoral Reform
2000	<u>Transition to Democracy</u> Since the 1980s, electoral processes in Mexico steadily became more competitive. <sup>69</sup> PRI lost the presidency in 2000. Mexico transitioned to a democracy, and the PRI shifted from an authoritarian ruling party to an authoritarian successor party. <sup>70</sup>
2007	<u>Regulating State Intervention in Political Parties' Internal Affairs</u> Following the controversial election of 2006, Mexico engaged in a re-assessment of its electoral rules. <sup>71</sup> The 2007 reform consisted of regulation of intra-party processes, which was passed to harmonise the constitution with a previous judicial ruling in 2003. <sup>72</sup>
2014	<u>Centralising the Rules</u> The 2014 reform was part of a wider electoral reform where the objective was to standardise federal and local legislation on political parties. The National Electoral Institute (Instituto Nacional Electoral, or INE – previously the IFE) was created, which oversees the appointment of members of the direction bodies of local electoral institutes. This removed local states' autonomy in dictating their own rules on political parties. Instead, the INE enforced legislation at both federal and state levels <sup>73</sup>
2024	<u>2024 General Election</u> In the country's biggest ever election, voters elected a new president, Claudia Sheinbaum, who became the first woman to be elected President of Mexico. Sheinbaum won the presidential election by a landslide, <sup>74</sup> with voter turnout at 62%. <sup>75</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Flores-Díaz, "A Brief Review of the History of Reforms."

<sup>70</sup> Gustavo A. Flores-Macías, "Mexico's PRI," in *Life after Dictatorship: Authoritarian Successor Parties Worldwide*, ed. James Loxton and Scott Mainwaring, (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 257-283.

<sup>71</sup> Gilles Serra, *Mexico's Electoral Reform of 2007: A Case of De-Democratization and Partyarchy*. [Unpublished manuscript, 2010].

<sup>72</sup> Flores-Díaz, "A Brief Review of the History of Reforms."

<sup>73</sup> Flores-Díaz, "A Brief Review of the History of Reforms."

<sup>74</sup> Carolina Millan, Jason Kao, and Yasufumi Saito, "Mexico Election 2024: Results: Mexico Election Results for Presidential, Congressional Races," *Bloomberg*, June 2, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2024-mexico-election-results/>.

<sup>75</sup> Instituto Nacional Electoral, *Federal Elections 2024*, 2024, <https://computos2024.ine.mx/>.