

Kazakhs Seek to Keep President

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ALMATY, Kazakhstan — Organizers of a petition drive in Kazakhstan calling for the president to remain in power for at least another decade said Tuesday that they have gathered signatures from at least half the nation's eligible voters.

Erlan Sydykov, a university rector running the petition campaign, said President Nursultan Nazarbayev's policies and popularity unquestionably made him the only candidate for the job.

"If there were an election in 2012, he would win anyway because he has so much authority among the people of Kazakhstan," Sydykov said.

Sydykov said more than 4 million signatures in support for the referendum have been collected, well in excess of the 200,000 signatures required. The petition will be submitted to election officials this week.

Parliament last month overwhelmingly voted to hold the referendum, but that move was swiftly struck down by Nazarbayev, who has ruled the country since the late 1980s. However, it is unclear whether he will be as quick to scotch the idea now it has apparently been backed by millions of voters.

Government opponents insist the entire operation has been a carefully choreographed public relations exercise.

"This whole thing has been a show organized by the presidential administration," activist Sergei Duvanov said.

The U.S. Embassy in Kazakhstan last week issued a statement attacking the proposed referendum, saying it would represent a setback for democracy.

But Sydykov rejects those charges.

"A referendum is also an exercise in democracy, like the ones you can see in the countries in the West, such as the United States," he said.

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