

Kazakhstan's Celebrities Woo Voters

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ALMATY, Kazakhstan — Crooners and TV personalities have launched a glitzy get-out-the-vote drive in an apparent sign that Kazakh authorities fear a low turnout in upcoming presidential elections could undermine the country's authoritarian ruler.

President Nursultan Nazarbayev, 70, is certain to win the snap April 3 vote and is unlikely to be threatened by any Middle East-style uprising. But online pro-democracy activists have begun a lively boycott campaign they hope could sabotage the whole affair.

Kazakhstan is a major exporter of energy and mineral resources to Western Europe and China, making its political developments a subject of close scrutiny in the international community.

Major opposition politicians have refused to take part in a vote they describe as a "farce," and that has dampened an already lackluster election campaign. Only three other minor political figures are in the running, and critics deride them as nominal opposition.

Borrowing from the official line, television presenter Bayan Yesentayeva appealed to Kazakhstan's voters to adopt a responsible civic position by casting their ballot.

"I think everybody should go out and pick their president, their leader," Yesentayeva said.

Government critics have accused celebrities backing the vote of being pawns of the authorities.

"It is clear who is behind this initiative. It has come from the presidential administration, because the authorities need to see a turnout of 70 or 80 percent," youth activist Zhanbolat Mamai said.

The campaigning celebrities deny acting on anybody's behalf and say they are simply trying to raise political awareness among the country's youth.

Kicking off their get-out-the-vote campaign, a group of singers has produced a slick music video for a cheerful ditty called "Vote for Kazakhstan!" The video has so far only been posted online, but it is due to be broadcast on national television stations, which are all either state-owned or government-friendly.

Yesentayeva said a series of concerts and festivals encouraging people to vote is also planned.

Despite opposition misgivings, Nazarbayev, who has ruled Kazakhstan since 1989, is backed by many Kazakhs who see him as a guarantor of stability and continuity.

Boycott supporters have concentrated efforts online, as authorities rarely grant permission for public protests and police quickly break up even the smallest unauthorized gathering. Several anti-government Facebook groups have sprung up in recent weeks and a flood of boycott videos have been posted on sites like YouTube.

Unlike the celebrities' effort, these videos are typically less slick and try to compensate with humor what they lack in polish.

One video on YouTube produced by the unregistered opposition party Alga has dubbed scenes from a "Lord of the Rings" movie with calls for viewers not to take part in the election.

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