


Chapter 2


Policy Innovation in Local Governance Direct Elections of Rural Mayors in Kazakhstan for Decentralization

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to assess the importance of direct elections of rural mayors (akims) for local governance and community development in rural districts of Kazakhstan. The study focuses on residents' perceptions and a comparative analysis of settlements where elections have taken place and those where they have not. Ili district is taken as a case. The study is based on survey data and structured interviews. The results show that in localities where direct elections have already taken place, citizens perceive them positively and believe that they contribute to increasing

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their participation in local governance. The study concludes that Kazakhstan is in the process of gradually democratising its local government system, as evidenced by the introduction of direct elections of akims. This study adds to the existing literature by analysing public perceptions of the reform and its impact on rural districts.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of direct elections for rural mayors (*akims*) in Kazakhstan in 2021 constituted a significant milestone in the ongoing reform of local self-government, giving rise to novel opportunities and challenges within the local governance system. The reform's stated objectives included enhancing the accountability of local authorities to citizens, cultivating democratic institutions, and fostering heightened public participation in decision-making processes. Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether the direct election of akims has resulted in substantive changes in local governance, or whether its impact has been constrained.

The notion of electing local government heads in Kazakhstan was first mooted in the 1990s, but at the time this step was perceived as a potential threat to political stability, especially in the context of a systemic economic crisis (Yuvitsa, 2019). During this period, the nation's focus was on mobilising resources to address the crisis, consequently relegating the matter of local government reform to a secondary position. However, with the advent of the 2000s, the necessity for decentralisation and the devolution of certain administrative powers to the local level once more became a salient issue (Mishra, 2009). In 2001, indirect elections were held for the akims of rural districts. Subsequent to this, in 2013 and 2017, general indirect elections of akims of various levels were organised, during which the heads of rural districts, villages and towns of district importance were elected by deputies of *maslikhats* (the representative body of local self-government) (Primbetova & Tlesova, 2015).

Significant reforms in local self-government began to take shape in 2020 (Ibadi-Idin & Pisareva, 2020; Sankhayeva & Arzikulov, 2021). In his address to the nation, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev emphasised the importance of direct elections for heads of rural settlements, reflecting a public demand for more democratic election processes. As outlined in paragraph 140 of the National Action Plan, direct elections for akims of rural settlements, whose terms were due to expire in 2021, were scheduled for December 2021 (Zakon, 2020). Amendments to the relevant laws were officially endorsed by the President on 24 May 2021, and subsequently came into force on 5 June. By 25 June, the presidential adviser on political issues, Erlan Karin, had announced via his Telegram channel that elections for over 700 rural akims would take place on 25 July, thus marking the implementation of another significant presidential initiative. Karin emphasised the significance of this event,

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