

## CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE KAZAKHSTANI PARTY SYSTEM

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**Abstract.** The purpose of the present paper is to provide a brief overview of how the Kazakhstani party system has changed in the course of the past two decades and of how important these changes have been. The key claim of the article is that the reduction of the fragmentation of the parliamentary party system was instrumental in creating the conditions for the preservation of the Kazakhstani constitutional order. To support this claim, which echoes the findings of a substantive research tradition, I will show that improvements in the political stability of the Republic of Kazakhstan has gone hand in hand with a marked reduction in the level of party system fragmentation.

**Keywords:** stability, Kazakhstan, party system, fragmentation, fractionalization.

**JEL codes:** H83

**Аңдатпа.** Осы құжаттың мақсаты - соңғы екі онжылдықта қазақстандық партиялық жүйенің қалай өзгергеніне және бұл өзгерістердің қаншалықты маңызды болғанына қысқаша шолу жасау. Мақаланың негізгі тұжырымы Қазақстанның конституциялық құрылысын сақтау үшін жағдай жасауда парламенттік партиялық жүйенің бөлшектенуінің азаюы маңызды рөл атқарғаны болып табылады. Терең зерттеу дәстүрінің тұжырымдарымен үндесетін бұл тұжырымды қолдау үшін автор Қазақстан Республикасындағы саяси тұрақтылықтың жақсаруы партиялық жүйенің фрагментация деңгейінің айтарлықтай төмендеуімен бірге жүріп жатқанын көрсетеді.

**Түйін сөздер:** тұрақтылық, Қазақстан, партиялық жүйе, фрагментация, фракциялау.

**JEL кодтар:** H83

**Аннотация.** Цель настоящего документа - дать краткий обзор того, как изменилась казахстанская партийная система за последние два десятилетия и насколько важными были эти изменения. Ключевое утверждение статьи заключается в том, что уменьшение фрагментации парламентской партийной системы сыграло важную роль в создании условий для сохранения конституционного строя Казахстана. Чтобы поддержать это утверждение, которое переключается с выводами основательной исследовательской традиции, автор показывает, что улучшение политической стабильности в Республике Казахстан идет вместе с заметным снижением уровня фрагментации партийной системы.

**Ключевые слова:** стабильность, Казахстан, партийная система, фрагментация, фракционирование.

**JEL коды:** H83

### Introduction

In addition to discussing the main themes that can be identified in the comparative study of party systems, I will argue that in Kazakhstan the presidential and the legislative elections have created two parallel party system. The party system emerging from the presidential elections has been characterized by the presence of a single relevant party (since only one party was able to win the Presidency), while the parliamentary party system in its historical development went from experiencing high levels of fragmentation in the mid- and late 1990s to having lower fragmentation and a single relevant party. The analysis of the parliamentary party systems also reveals

that there are two clearly identifiable phases in the historical development of the parliamentary party system in Kazakhstan—a first phase in which the fragmentation of the party system declined, followed by a second phase in which the fragmentation of the party system has increased.

In addition to discussing the trends in the level of fragmentation, measured in terms of Rae's index of fractionalization and the Effective Number of Parties (ENP), I will also attempt to explain why the transformation of the parliamentary party system and the reduction in the level of fragmentation has been so important for Kazakhstan. In the comparative party politics literature (*Mainwaring, 1993; Stepan and Skach,*

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1993; Przeworski et al., 1996) the fragmentation of the party system is known to destabilize the constitutional order in countries with a presidential form of government. The constitutional order in countries with a presidential form of government does not last as long as it does in countries with a parliamentary form of government. But, more importantly for the purposes of the present paper, the constitutional order lasts even less in presidential systems in which the party system is (highly) fragmented. The implications of this body of research for the Kazakhstani case are clear: the reduction of the fragmentation of the parliamentary party system was then instrumental in creating the conditions for the preservation of the Kazakhstani constitutional order. To support this claim, which echoes the findings of a substantive research tradition, I will show that improvements in the political stability of the Republic of Kazakhstan has gone hand in hand with a marked reduction in the level of party system fragmentation.

While reducing the fragmentation was probably a necessity and produced some positive results (political stability), it also came at the cost of lower accountability.

In the conclusive section I will draw, as is customary, some tentative conclusions. In doing so, I will suggest that the real challenge for Kazakhstani policy makers is to find the optimal level of fragmentation—a level that secures accountability without compromising other dimensions of good governance.

### Literature Review

The literature on party systems is one of the most developed bodies of research in political science. This line of research has focused on what are party systems, on why there are cross-national differences in the party system format, on the way in which party systems can be categorized, on how party system attributes can be best assessed and measured, and, needless to say on the consequences or rather the political implications of the party system attributes.

Sartori, in his *Parties and Party Systems* (Sartori, 1976) defined a party system as the system that results from the pattern of inter-party competition and suggested that in such a system a party is a function of every other party in the system in the sense it reacts competitively or otherwise

to the presence/existence of these other parties.

Sartori (1976) also made clear that a party system is a stable pattern of inter-party competition. Those countries in which the pattern of inter-party competition is highly unstable, that is when it changes nearly in each and every election, were defined by Sartori as 'fluid polities'. And, Sartori added, the patterns of inter-party competition in these fluid polities could not be regarded as party system proper because they did not display the stability, the durability, that is instead associated with the structured patterns of inter-party competition that is instead associated with the proper party systems.

Sartori (1976) also added that the best indication of whether a party system is structured or not was provided by the presence or absence of mass parties of social integration (or simply mass parties). The patterns of inter-party competition in countries where there are mass parties are structured and the patterns of inter-party competition where mass parties do not exist are fluid. Mass parties were not simply providing an indication of the structuring of the party system but were actually structuring the party system itself.

Having observed that within the family of structured party system there were several 'types' (one party system, hegemonic party system, predominant party system, two-party system, moderate pluralism, polarized pluralism) Sartori noted that the differences between these types reflected differences in what Lipset and Rokkan (1967) had defined as 'the cleavage structure'.

In the 1950s Duverger (1959) had argued that party systems were the result of history and institutions or, more specifically, of history and electoral systems. Building on Duverger's intuition Lipset and Rokkan (1967) explored the historical determinants of a party system format. Specifically Lipset and Rokkan (1967) suggested that countries, in their historical development, experience at various critical junctures a series of revolutions, that these revolutions segment or divide a society and that the format of a party system reflects the number of cleavages that are politically salient or divisive when universal suffrage or voting rights are granted to the population. A two party system can be found in countries in

which only one cleavage is salient when universal suffrage is granted while more fragmented party systems are found in countries where a higher number of cleavages was salient when universal suffrage was granted. Taagepera and Grofman (1985) expressed the relationship between number of parties and number of cleavages (or issues) in a mathematical form and suggested that the number of parties equals the number of cleavages plus one or, conversely, that the number of cleavages equals the number of parties minus one.

Political scientists disagreed as to how party systems could be best understood. In this respect, and at the risk of gross oversimplification, two schools of thought emerged. On the one hand a group of scholars (Duverger, Sartori) believed that a qualitative categorization of party system represented the best way to understand them while a second group of scholar attempted, on the other hand, to quantify the relevant characteristics of party systems. The two best known and most widely used metrics to capture the relevant features or the attributes of a party system are represented by Rae's index of fractionalization (Rae, 1967) and by Laakso and Taagepera's Effective Number of Parties (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979).

$$ENP = \frac{1}{1-F}$$

Where ENP is the Effective Number of parties and F is Rae's index of Fractionalization, which can be estimated with the formula

$$F = 1 - \frac{1}{n(n-1)} \sum f_i(f_i - 1)$$

The interest in the party system attributes, that is in the fragmentation (captured both by the effective number of parties or by Rae's index of fractionalization) was due to the fact that from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward political scientists had understood that the properties or attributes of party system had a considerable impact on the functioning and the performance of the political system. From Lowell (1896) to Taylor and Herman (1971), political scientists understood that the fragmentation of the party system had a destabilizing effect and reduced the duration/durability of governments, while Pelizzo and Cooper

(2001) showed that the stability of legislatures was inversely related to the fragmentation of the party system. Fragmentation was shown to be detrimental not only for the stability but also for the effectiveness of governments. From Lowell (1896) to Sartori (1976) to Tsebelis (2002), a large body of research has shown that the performance of governments is negatively affected and/or compromised by the fragmentation of the party system. Tsebelis, for instance, has shown that as fragmentation increases the production of high quality legislation declines, the production of low quality legislation increases, and the fiscal deficit increases. Worse, several studies showed that precisely because the fragmentation of the party system prevents government from adequately performing their tasks and from being effective, it can eventually lead to inter-institutional conflict and the breakdown of the constitutional order. While the breakdown of the constitutional order can occur both under parliamentary and presidential form of government, the work of Stepan and Skach (1993), Mainwaring (1993) and Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub and Limongi (1996) made clear that the fragmentation of the party system and, more specifically, the hyper-fragmentation of the party system lead to a breakdown of the constitutional order as presidential system become dysfunctional when there are too many parties in the legislative branch.

### The Kazakhstani case

What I have said so far has some relevant implications for the Kazakhstani case. The Kazakhstani party system can be viewed as the result of both Presidential and Legislative elections. In the Presidential elections held in the 1999-2015 period, the candidate of the Nur Otan party, the First President, won more than 80 per cent of the vote in each of the elections, won more than 90 per cent of the vote in 3 elections (2005, 2011, 2015) and in two instances won more than 95 per cent of the vote (2011, 2015).

The fact that the candidate of the same party won so many consecutive elections, to use Sartori's concept, reveals that in the party system resulting from the presidential elections there was only one relevant party and that was nearly not much fragmentation to speak of.

Yet, a very different picture emerges if one analyzes the results of the legislative elections. In the early years of the Republic of Kazakhstan, soon after Kazakhstan had reached its independence, the legislative elections produced a highly fragmented party

systems.

If we compute Rae's index of fractionalization to estimate the fragmentation of the parliamentary party system we find that the level of fractionalization in 1999 was

$$F = 1 - \frac{(11*10)+(3*2)+(23*22)+(1*0)+(23+22)+(13*12)+(3*2)}{77*76} =$$

$$1 - \frac{1290}{5852} =$$

$$1 - .220 = .780$$

By repeating the same computations for the elections held in 1995, 2004, 2007, 2016 and 2021, it becomes evident that the fragmentation of the parliamentary party system has steadily declined over time. See table 1.

Laakso and Taagepera (1979) proposed a new way of quantifying the fragmentation of the party system. The formula proposed by Laakso and Taagepera is the Effective Number of Parties which estimates the number of equal sized parties that would be required to generate the fractionalization that we detect in the party system. Since, as we have noted above the Effective Number of Parties equals  $1/(1-F)$ ,

knowing what is the level of fractionalization of a party system, it is fairly straightforward to estimate the Effective Number of Parties.

Since in 1999, as we have just shown, the fractionalization was .780, we can easily find out that :  $ENP = \frac{1}{1 - .780} = \frac{1}{.220} = 4.54$

By computing the ENP for all the years in which parliamentary elections were held, we find that the lowest ENP was recorded in the 2007 elections, that the highest was recorded in 1995 and that in three elections (1995, 1999, 2004) was higher than the level at which the constitutional order in a country with a presidential form of government is able to survive. See table 1.

**Table 1 – Fractionalization of the Parliamentary Party System in Kazakhstan**

Year->	1995	1999	2004	2007	2012	2016	2021
Fractionalization->	.808	.780	.651	.156	.388	.375	.479
Effective Number of Parties	5.2	4.54	2.86	1.18	1.63	1.6	1.9

Visual inspection of the data presented in Table 1 and Figure 1 suggests that in the history of legislative elections it is possible to detect two distinct phases. The first phase (1995-2004) was characterized by a marked decline in the fragmentation of the parliamentary party system while the second phase (2004-2021) was characterized by an increase in the level of fragmentation/fractionalization – which, however, did not return to the levels recorded in the mid- and late-1990s.

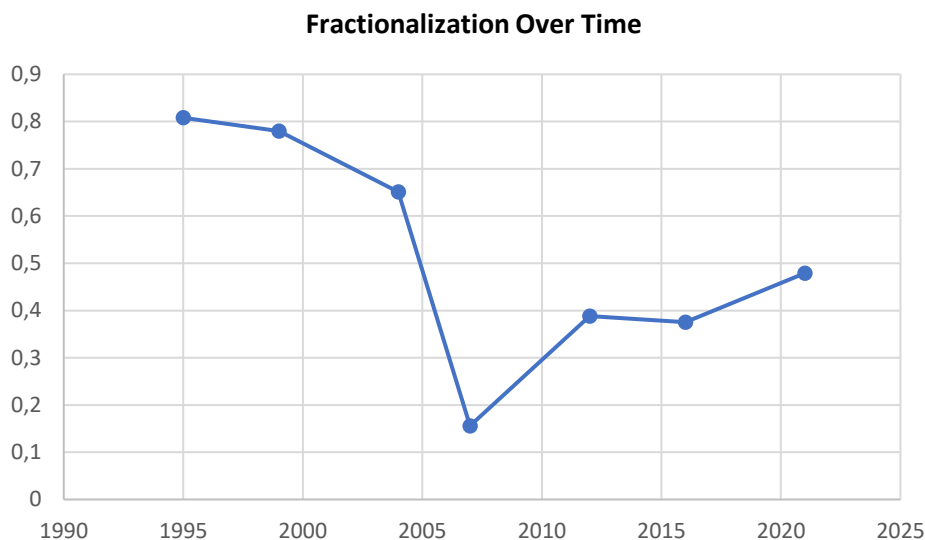
The electoral returns of the legislative elections in Kazakhstan reveal that the parliamentary party system differed considerably from the party system which emerged from the presidential elections in at least two respects. The fractionalization recorded in the parliamentary elections was consistently much higher than the

fractionalization of the party system resulting from the presidential elections. Second, while the party system that emerged from the presidential elections was always and consistently characterized by the presence of a single relevant party -which could induce analyst to describe it as either hegemonic or predominant if one were to use Sartori' s categories – the parliamentary party system was characterized by the presence of a single relevant party only from 2004 onwards. This claim is supported by the fact that while the Nur Otan party had already emerged as the largest parliamentary party in the 1999 elections when it won 23 of the 77 parliamentary seats (or 29.8 per cent), it had not been able to win in those elections a majority of the parliamentary seats. But in each of the following elections (2004, 2007, 2012, 2016, 2021) Nur Otan won a sizeable

majority of the parliamentary seats, established itself as the only relevant party in the country, became the cornerstone of the parliamentary party system in Kazakhstan and contributed significantly to the reduction of the fragmentation of the party system.

These data allow the analyst to make

an additional observation, namely that the reduction of the fragmentation of the parliamentary party system went hand in hand with a transformation of the type of party system (from one in which there is more than a single relevant party to one in which there is only a single relevant party).



**Figure 1 – Fractionalization of the parliamentary party system 1995-2021**

### The implications of party system change

One of the, possibly incorrect, statements that party systems scholars may at times find in the literature is that presidentialism promotes the fragmentation of the party system. The statement is questionable on because previous studies, such as Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub and Limongi (1996) had reported that the level of party system fragmentation that was historically detected in countries with a presidential form of government was virtually undistinguishable from the level of fragmentation that it is possible to detect in countries with a parliamentary form of government.

The difference is not so much on the level of fragmentation that can be detected in presidential and parliamentary systems but concerns instead the implications of fragmentation -especially high level of fragmentation or hyper-fragmentation- for the functioning, the stability and the survival of the constitutional order.

In this regard the literature has shown that too much fragmentation of the (parliamentary) party system undermines

governments' ability to perform at an acceptable level, governments lose that portion of legitimacy that is performance-based, and the constitutional order breaks down as a result of poor performance and loss of legitimacy.

While hyper-fragmentation can lead to a breakdown of the constitutional order in both parliamentary and presidential systems, presidential systems are less likely to survive in combination with a highly fragmented party system. Stepan and Skach (1993) reported that presidentialism survived in countries in which the effective number of parties - which is one of the formulas that can be adopted to estimate the fragmentation of the party system – was of 2.6 or less. In 1995, 1999 and 2004 the effective number of parties in Kazakhstan was considerably higher than 2.6: it was 5.2 in 1995, 4.54 in 1999 and 2.86 in 2004.

Regardless of whether hyper-fragmentation is the situation in which the largest party has between one third but less than a half of the legislative seats (Przeworski et al, 1996) or whether it reflects the effective number of parties, the duration of the constitutional order can be seriously compromised by high levels of fragmentation



(large effective number of parties, high levels of fractionalization, absence of a majority party,...).

The fact that the Kazakhstani constitutional order proved so stable and successful was due, to some significant extent, to the fact that the electoral success of Nur Otan, reduced the number of the relevant parties, reduced the fragmentation of the parliamentary party system, and created the conditions in which the Kazakhstani constitutional order could thrive and secure/promote the well being of the Kazakhstani population.

In 2021 Baris, Knox and Pelizzo published an article on good and/or good enough governance in Central Asia and the Post-Soviet states. These authors reported that political stability, as measured by the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, was the single most important driver of economic growth and development

in the region.

The reduction of the fragmentation of the Kazakhstani party system was very instrumental in securing/promoting the stability of Kazakhstan. In figure 2, we present a scatterplot that displays graphically the relationship between the fragmentation of the party system and political stability in Kazakhstan. The scatterplot reveals that there is a strong, negative relationship between these two variables. High fragmentation is associated with low levels of political stability and low fragmentation is associated with high level of political stability. About 85 per cent of the variance in the level of political stability is explained by the variation in fragmentation. Leaving statistical jargon aside the implication is clear: reducing the fragmentation of the party system was one of the most important reasons why the Kazakhstani political order became properly constituted and stabilized over time.

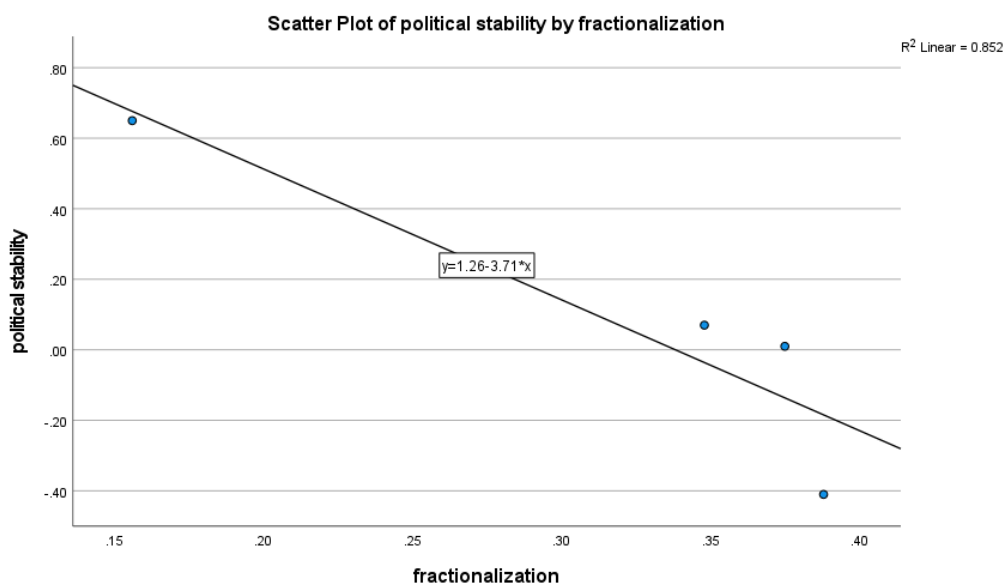


Figure 2 - Political Stability and Fragmentation

### The Dividends of Fragmentation

While the fragmentation of a party system may erode the government effectiveness, government stability and ultimately the stability of a political regime, very low levels of fragmentation may also prove problematic.

Low levels of fragmentation may in fact reflect that a party system may not be sufficiently competitive, that it may not allow society to properly voice its demands, and that it may reduce the accountability of a

political system.

While accountability is generally regarded as one of the most important dimensions of good governance, Pasquino and Pelizzo (2022) have recently suggested that accountability is a key democratic virtue. High levels of accountability reflect the quality of a democratic government, they contribute to the better performance of a democratic government, they are instrumental in preserving the legitimacy of a political regime. The level of accountability, Pasquino and Pelizzo (2022) went on to

argue is the result of not only of institutional and cultural conditions but also, and equally importantly, of the nature of the electoral competition. Where elections are not sufficiently competitive, governments and elected officials struggle to take into account voters' preferences in the formulation of their government programs, they may not have much of an incentive to keep voters' preferences into account in the formulation of policies and legislative proposals and they may not feel terribly compelled to give voters a proper account of their performance.

The Kazakhstani data allow one to test the claims that Pasquino and Pelizzo (2022) have advanced. Specifically one can explore the relationship between the fragmentation of the party system and its accountability. The analysis reveals (see figure 3) that more than 50 per cent in the variance of accountability is explained by the fragmentation/fractionalization of the

Kazakhstani party system. In other words, the more fragmented/fractionalized the Kazakhstani party system, the higher is the level of accountability, while the lower the level of fragmentation, the lower is the level of accountability.

The implication of this set of findings is clear: while too much fragmentation is clearly detrimental, especially for the stability of a political regime, some fragmentation is actually beneficial because it gives voters an opportunity to voice their demands, promotes accountability, and ultimately leads to better governance and better policy making. And in so far as the legitimacy of a government (and of a political regime) depends on its ability to be responsive to the demands of the citizens, some fragmentation and more accountability are essential to enhance the legitimacy of the political regime and increase citizen trust in the government.

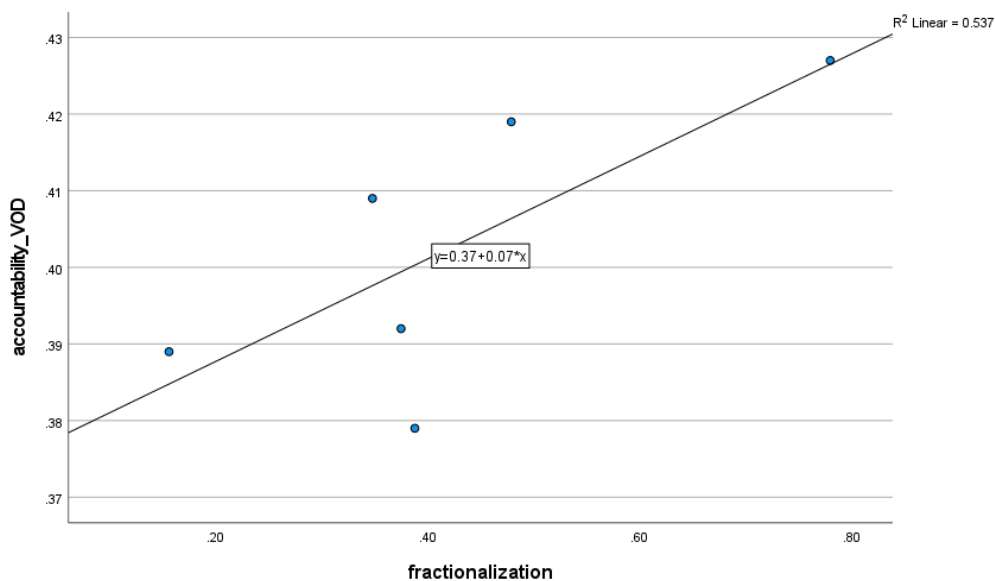


Figure 3 – Accountability and Fragmentation

## Conclusions

The evidence presented in this paper shows that the level of fragmentation in the Kazakhstani party system has changed over the years, that a reduction in the fragmentation of the party system went hand in hand and was possibly for higher levels of political stability that Kazakhstan needed to make progress along the developmental path. The data analysis, however, also reveals that the reduction in the fragmentation of the party system went hand

in hand with a decrease in the level of the accountability of the Kazakhstani political system –which is also problematic for the proper functioning of a political system. If voter demands are not adequately taken and kept into consideration, voters satisfaction with the functioning of the political system is bound to decrease along with the trust in government and the legitimacy of the political system itself.

This is the dilemma that policy makers and political leaders need to address. If they keep fragmentation to a minimum they

compromise accountability, but if they allow fragmentation to rise they may compromise government performance.

The Kazakhstani political leaders in recent years have taken several steps to open up the political system. Under President Tokayev, various constitutional reforms have increased the freedom of assembly, established quotas for women and youth in Parliament, reduced the number of members required to create a party, and recognized the constitutional role of

opposition parties. Each of these measures is designed to make the electoral process more competitive, to make the political system more accountable and to maintain some levels of fragmentation in the party system.

The real challenge would be to identify the optimal level of fragmentation to have accountability without compromising government effectiveness and political stability.

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## ҚАЗАҚСТАНДЫҚ ПАРТИЯ ЖҮЙЕСІНДЕГІ САБАҚТАСТЫҚ ПЕН ӨЗГЕРІСТЕР

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## ПРЕЕМСТВЕННОСТЬ И ИЗМЕНЕНИЯ В КАЗАХСТАНСКОЙ ПАРТИЙНОЙ СИСТЕМЕ

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