

KAZAKHSTAN: Early elections will strengthen president

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President Nursultan Nazarbayev dissolved parliament today and announced that early elections will be held on August 18. Regular elections were not due until 2009, but for the recently adopted reform package to take effect, new elections must be held. According to the amendments, the number of deputies in parliament will be raised from the current 77 to 107. All seats will be filled from party lists, to be drawn up from June 22 to July 11. Judicial amendments approved by parliament this week prohibit parties from forming electoral blocs, a move that followed attempts by the country's two leading opposition parties -- Ak Zhol and the Social Democratic Party -- to run as a bloc. It is unclear whether these two parties will be able to overcome their differences and merge into one. Importantly, the elections will bring into effect the amendment to waive the number of terms for which Nazarbayev can stand for president. **Following the elections, Nazarbayev will effectively become president-for-life. Pro-presidential Nur-Otan party will retain -- and even strengthen -- its already dominant position in the legislature.**