



## 5<sup>th</sup> National Kurultai and New Kazakhstan: Political Architecture, Consultation, and Institutional Reform

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The kurultai, a time-honored and deeply rooted institution among Turkic peoples, is likewise grounded in the historical tradition among Kazakhs of a grand assembly in which khans and societal leaders made critical decisions through consultation. In the modern era, the National Kurultai (Ultyq Quryltai) has been established as a platform for consultation and dialogue aimed at adapting this heritage to the requirements of contemporary governance. Within the framework of the reform agenda launched in 2022 by the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the Kurultai seeks to institutionalize regular consultation between the state and society, while strengthening social consensus, national unity, and inclusiveness in public policymaking. The establishment of the Kurultai can be understood as part of President Tokayev's broader effort to transform the concept of a listening state into a permanent institutional mechanism (Akorda, 2022).

In this context, the Fifth National Kurultai was convened on January 20, 2026, in Kyzylorda and, as emphasized in President Tokayev's address, more clearly articulated the political architecture underpinning the transition to the next stage of the New Kazakhstan vision (Akorda, 2026; The Astana Times, 2026). The selection of Kyzylorda as the venue was not merely symbolic; it was also substantively aligned with concrete policy issues highlighted in the President's speech, including the Aral Sea basin, water security, and regional development (Akorda, 2026). Indeed, the prior approval of the Kurultai's date and the public disclosure of instructions regarding the preparatory process demonstrate that the meeting was designed as a structured, planned, and programmatic mechanism of consultation.

The first four National Kurultais created a cumulative foundation of deliberation and consultation that gradually prepared the ground for the reform agenda articulated at the fifth meeting. As emphasized in President Tokayev's address, the first Kurultai, held in Ulytau in 2022, foregrounded the idea of embedding the narrative of New Kazakhstan within society, strengthening national unity, and discussing reforms on a participatory basis (Akorda, 2022). The second Kurultai, convened in Turkistan in 2023, placed the concept of the responsible citizen and the issue of social ethics grounded in shared values at its core, while rendering more visible the role of youth policy, education, and culture in the process of modernization (National Kurultai, 2023). The third Kurultai, held in Atyrau in 2024, highlighted themes of social justice, labor, and wage equity within the framework of the Just

Kazakhstan discourse, underscoring that social modernization cannot be confined solely to economic indicators (National Kurultai, 2024). The fourth meeting, organized in Burabay in 2025, demonstrated that the Kurultai had evolved into a consultative mechanism capable of taking the pulse of society, with a broader agenda encompassing public order, the information ecosystem, values, and regional development (Sakenova, 2025). What unites these meetings is their reinforcement of the notion that reforms must generate social legitimacy rather than remain mere technical adjustments. Accordingly, the Fifth National Kurultai may be interpreted as a more ambitious and comprehensive package of institutional design, built upon the consultative capacity developed during the previous four sessions and upon the relationship established between values and systemic order.

The defining feature of the Fifth National Kurultai lies in its proposal of an integrated framework that goes beyond the mere announcement of individual reforms, instead aiming to streamline the architecture of the state and to reconfigure the mechanisms of consultation. The constitutional reform package introduced in President Tokayev's address was presented with an emphasis on a fundamental transition from the 1995 constitutional model toward a new political system (Akorda, 2026). This approach indicates that reforms will be pursued not as fragmented or ad hoc measures, but as a coherent institutional design in which components complement one another. In this context, two strategic objectives come to the fore: first, to render mechanisms of representation and checks and balances more streamlined, comprehensible, and accountable; and second, to conduct the reform process within a framework that advances social consent and political stability without generating uncertainty (Akorda, 2026).

Within this framework, the most widely discussed prospective step is the proposal to transform the parliament into a unicameral body and to rename it the "Kurultai" (Akorda, 2026). A unicameral model has the potential to accelerate the legislative process and to reduce overlaps in authority and function. In countries such as Kazakhstan, which pursue rapid transformation, the simplification of decision-making processes is of particular importance for enhancing the implementation capacity of reforms (The Astana Times, 2026). However, in order to ensure that such simplification does not weaken democratic quality, the strengthening of internal parliamentary oversight becomes critically important. In this regard, President Tokayev's proposal to completely abolish both the special quota previously reserved for members

of parliament appointed directly by the President and the dedicated quota allocated to the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan stands out as an indication of confidence in the institutional maturity of the legislature and in the principle of equal representation (Akorda, 2026). Indeed, President Tokayev's proposal at the National Kurultai to grant new powers to parliamentarians was presented as an approach aimed at enhancing the checks and balances capacity of the legislature within a unicameral system (Akorda, 2026). By way of example, the expansion of parliament's approval role in the selection of Supreme Court judges and in appointments to key institutions was placed on the agenda (Akorda, 2026). Such arrangements may serve to balance the speed advantage of a unicameral structure with legitimacy and accountability.

The second major innovation is the proposal for a People's Council (Halyq Kenesi), intended to replace both the National Kurultai and the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan (APK) (Akorda, 2026). President Tokayev noted that both institutions had fulfilled their historical missions and emphasized the need for a broader and more comprehensive platform for national dialogue (Akorda, 2026). The proposed design of the People's Council comprising 126 members; providing equal representation from ethno-cultural associations, maslikhats, and public organizations; appointing members by the President while electing the chair from among the members embodies a dual claim of inclusiveness and orderly governance (Akorda, 2026). Furthermore, the proposal to grant the People's Council the right of legislative initiative was presented as a significant indication that consultative bodies should not be confined to merely symbolic functions (Akorda, 2026). This arrangement may also be interpreted as an attempt at institutional design aimed at addressing a recurring criticism voiced during the Kurultai experience namely, that while recommendations were abundant, their practical impact remained limited. The discussion of granting the structure constitutional status further demonstrates that the proposed model seeks to address questions of institutional continuity and predictability (Akorda, 2026).

The third critical pillar concerns the establishment of the office of Vice President and the clarification of the succession framework. President Tokayev proposed that the Vice President be appointed by the President and approved by a parliamentary majority, and that the office assume responsibilities related to representation, relations with parliament, and engagement with societal institutions (Akorda, 2026). More importantly, he underscored without ambiguity the principle that, in the event of an early vacancy of the presidential office, elections must be held within two months, presenting this as a foundational and non-negotiable rule (Akorda, 2026). When read together, these two measures suggest an objective that extends beyond administrative coordination alone; they may also be interpreted as a carefully designed framework for transition security, aimed at ensuring the uninterrupted production of political legitimacy within the system.

On the development and competitiveness front, the Kurultai's emphasis on digital transformation and artificial intelligence reflects the fifth meeting's forward-looking perspective on future capacity. The assertion that digitalization and artificial intelligence are reshaping global power balances, that adaptive speed rather than population size will determine countries'

relative positions, and that investment in technology gains meaning only when coupled with good governance offers a more pragmatic framework in which technology is positioned not as an end in itself, but as an instrument (Akorda, 2026). This approach has the potential to temper the frequently encountered assumption in digital government initiatives that technology alone can resolve systemic challenges; without process optimization, institutional culture, and the strengthening of public administration capacity, digitalization is unlikely to generate sustainable efficiency gains (Jeksenbai, 2026; Kazinform.kz, 2026). Accordingly, the digital agenda of the Fifth National Kurultai may be read not merely as an innovation objective, but also as a call for an implementation discipline integrated with broader governance reform.

In the context of the economy and strategic sectors, the themes of energy security and water security acquire particular significance through the decision to hold the Kurultai in Kyzylorda, a region characterized by heightened environmental vulnerability. The overarching framework of the Kurultai reinforces the notion that the country's long-term transformation objectives such as digitalization, industrial development, and infrastructure expansion cannot be sustained without robust energy governance and effective resource management. Within this framework, the transformation vision articulated at the Kurultai extends beyond energy and strategic sectors to emphasize the strengthening of human capital, which constitutes the foundation of long-term national development, and to ensure that investments in education, science, and high technology yield tangible outcomes in this direction (Akorda, 2026).

Another distinguishing feature of the Fifth National Kurultai is its effort to reinterpret the discourse of reform not solely through the lens of institutional arrangements, but within a broader framework of historical and intellectual continuity. In this regard, the emphasis on the notion of the just citizen articulated at the Kurultai reflects a clear intellectual lineage connecting Abai's teaching of the complete human being and Khoja Akhmet Yasawi's morally centered worldview. Through this approach, the Kurultai positions transformation not as a purely technical process of modernization, but as a long-term, value-based project of societal reconstruction. Indeed, the evolution of the Kurultai into a mechanism that produces not only consultation but also concrete legislative outcomes demonstrates that this normative orientation is being supported by institutional capacity. Within the contemporary context, universities occupy a particularly important position among the carriers of this intellectual continuity (Temirbekova, 2026).

Universities assume a critical role and responsibility in enhancing the contribution of young people who constitute the guarantee of the future to the country's human capital. In an era marked by the accelerating dynamics of digitalization, global competition, and multi-layered social transformation, it has become a strategic necessity to educate younger generations not only with technical expertise, but also with historical consciousness, multilingual competence, and a strong sense of social responsibility. Within this framework, universities must aim not only to equip individuals with the knowledge and skills demanded by the age, but also to strengthen their sense of social belonging and civic responsibility.

One of the pioneering institutions that has translated this mission into concrete practice is the Khoja Akhmet Yasawi International Kazakh-Turkish University. Through the graduates it has educated to date, the university has made significant contributions not only to the development of Kazakhstan's human capital, but also, more broadly, to that of the Turkic World. While equipping young people with contemporary knowledge through its innovative educational and research activities, the university also contributes to the construction of a shared future vision grounded in common history, culture, and values. In alignment with President Tokayev's vision of a Just Kazakhstan, the university has adopted as a fundamental principle the cultivation of individuals who prioritize justice, responsibility, and social benefit. In this respect, the Khoja Akhmet Yasawi International Kazakh-Turkish University stands out not merely as a higher education institution, but as a strategic actor contributing to the sustainable development objectives of the country and the Turkic World.

When considered collectively, the address delivered at the Fifth National Kurultai places simultaneous emphasis on multiple domains of reform, including the reconfiguration of the political system, the strengthening of consultative mechanisms between society and the state, and the enhancement of governance capacity through digitalization within the context of economic transformation. This framework advances a constructive reform narrative that proceeds not through popularization, but through institutionalization. The key measure of success will lie, following the acquisition of legitimacy through referenda and legislative processes, in the extent to which the newly proposed institutions operate in practice with accountability; in how effectively parliament exercises its expanded powers in the spheres of judicial oversight and supervision; and in whether the People's Council is able to transform consultation into substantive policy input (Akorda, 2026; Zhedenbekov, 2025; Jeksenbai, 2026).

In conclusion, the reforms proposed at the Fifth Kurultai represent an effort to situate the vision of New Kazakhstan within a more systematic and governable framework. While the People's Council seeks to secure the continuity of consultation through constitutional guarantees, the unicameral parliament and the reallocation of powers aim to generate both speed and balance in decision-making processes. The introduction of the vice presidency and the clarification of succession arrangements are presented as systemic safeguards that reinforce the principle of renewing democratic legitimacy through elections. What these reforms collectively promise is to render Kazakhstan's internal order more resilient in the face of global uncertainties, thereby making its development objectives more sustainable. It is precisely at this juncture that the positive and constructive legacy of the Kurultai becomes most evident: whether reforms move beyond declared objectives and are translated, through institutional practice, into public trust will ultimately determine the true success of this reform process.

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