



ANALYSES

Developments in Kazakhstan: Backgrounds, repercussions and future scenarios



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The January protests in Kazakhstan are believed to have begun spontaneously, not triggered by any political forces inside or outside the country. [Reuters]

When Kassym-Jomart Tokayev became president, the people of Kazakhstan were given hope that life would change for the better. Experts talked about a successful transition model. Still, changing of the nominal head of the government did not lead to a substantial change whether in the political or the economic makeup. In addition, economic hardship aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic caused social dissatisfaction; and, to make things worse, an ill-conceived and steep increase in the cost of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) sparked civil unrest with unpredicted circumstances.

To assess the situation, we need to consider two factors of this situation: the transition from Nazarbayev's period and the involvement of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).

Successful transition model?

Nursultan Nazarbayev ruled Kazakhstan for 30 years until 2019. In 2013, I wrote an article [\(1\)](#) describing the clan politics that dominated all spheres of life in Kazakhstan. Back then, the first president had enough power to build a fairer and more inclusive governmental model, but instead spent the following years solidifying his authoritarian rule and further concentrating all the state's financial resources in the hands of his relatives and companions.

In 2019, Nazarbayev named Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who was serving as the Chairman of the Senate of Kazakhstan at the time, as his successor. Nazarbayev also proclaimed himself the head of the Security Council. Later in 2019, Tokayev was elected as president, but was given little tools to influence the so-called “transition period”, which has been nothing but a fight for the partition of Nazarvayev’s empire.

Although Nazarbayev practically turned the economy of Kazakhstan into his family enterprise, balance in the relationships between his relatives and collaborators has only been guaranteed by his own personal power. For instance, his daughter, Dariga Nazarvayeva, son-in-law, Timur Kulibayev, and nephew, Kayrat Satybaldi, whose interests often collide, are among the main beneficiaries of his regime. The first president’s retirement exacerbated the struggle for financial and political resources due to increasing uncertainty among elites regarding future privileges and protection. [\(2\)](#)

Since 2019, experts have highlighted the dual nature of power in the country, calling Tokayev a puppet leader whose main role was to facilitate a smooth transition. However, in November 2021, Nazarbayev unexpectedly stepped down from his position as chairman of the Nur Otan Party and voluntarily appointed Tokayev in his stead. Nazarbayev surprised analysts, and we can only guess his motive. Why was his politically experienced daughter, Dariga, not appointed as chair? Did he bet on Tokayev’s personal power and believe that the latter could become a true leader and protect the state from tribal strife? Perhaps we could find the answer in someone’s memoirs in the future.

This is where the new year found Kazakhstan: faced with the mounting dissatisfaction of the population due to economic hardships, redistribution of power between old and new elites and unknown consequences of the power transition looming on the horizon.

The January protests in Kazakhstan are believed to have begun spontaneously, not triggered by any political forces inside or outside the country. But in the absence of a strong and sane opposition, or any opposition at all, no one claimed responsibility for the protests, united the people or “authorised” their claims. [\(3\)](#)

Nevertheless, Tokayev was able to turn the situation around in his favour. He used this moment to issue a decree dissolving the parliament, and dismissed Karim Massimov from his position as the head of the National Security Committee (also known as KNB intelligence agency) and ordered his arrest. Massimov is a supporter of Nazarbayev and one of the regime’s main figures. He had served as prime minister from 2007 to 2012 and from 2014 to 2016 as well as Nazarbayev’s chief of staff in between the terms, and chairman of the intelligence service from 2016. Other KNB officers were arrested also. Tokayev also assumed the chairmanship of the Security Council, dismissing Nazarvayev himself from that post.

The whereabouts of Nursultan Nazarbayev remain unknown, as he has not given any statements since the beginning of the unrest. Tokayev, in turn, was bold enough to openly criticise his predecessor. This was the first time since the beginning of the unrest that the president actually mentioned Nazarbayev. That was not done even on 5 January, when Tokayev proclaimed himself the new head of the Security Council.

“It is thanks to the first president . . . that a group of very profitable companies and a layer of rich people even by international standards has appeared,” he stated. “I believe the time has come to give back to the people of Kazakhstan and start helping them systematically.” [\(4\)](#)

Dismissing Nazarbayev’s allies, who have been frustrating the people with their wealth and unrestricted power, will help Tokayev win the trust of the population, solidify power and hold old elites accountable for economic instability. It is nonetheless worth noting that his promise to make the lives of the people better has come somewhat late, as he had served as prime minister from 1999 to 2002 and as chair of the Senate from 2013 to 2019. Even if he was a rotatable pawn in Nazarbayev’s hands, it is hard to believe that he had no opportunity to help develop democratic institutions.

What happened in Kazakhstan is a reset of political power and economic resources through the conflict of old and new elites accelerated by political unrest. But the shift of power will not come to fruition as long as Nazarbayev’s elites retain their influence. Will the president be able to solidify his rule? Will he achieve a real democratic transformation of government institutes and a compromise with other actors?

He still has a long way to go. Nazarbayev’s authoritarian rule overshadowed the whole political arena. Nazarbayev in effect was the system; and replacing him with another ruler makes the regime extremely unstable. Thus, Tokayev will have to build his own system, win the trust of the people compromise with new elites and resist the old ones, and obtain control over law enforcement authorities and make them effective.

Most importantly, the reasons that lead to the current situation – namely, extreme inequality, corruption and political fatigue – still exist. Without deep political and economic transformation, any government will face new upheavals in the society.

The role of CSTO

After the escalation of the protests that began as peaceful demonstrations against the rise of the prices of LPG and descended into riots, Tokayev requested the CSTO to send military assistance, maintaining that it was necessary “to help Kazakhstan overcome this terrorist threat.” [\(5\)](#)

Article 4 of the CSTO charter states: “In case of aggression commission (armed attack menacing to safety, stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty) to any of the Member States, all the other Member States at request of this Member State shall immediately provide the latter with the necessary help, including military one.” [\(6\)](#)

The members of the CSTO are Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Obviously, Russia is its leader as it possesses the largest arsenals and greatest military strength. Although there is no proof that any foreign state or non-state actors participated in the riots, the leaders of the member states were prompt to emphasise that Kazakhstan faces an external threat. In fact, Putin stated, “Well organised and clearly managed groups of militants were used...including those who obviously underwent training in terrorist camps abroad.” [\(7\)](#)

This gave the organisation formal authorisation to start a peacekeeping operation in Kazakhstan, its first mission since its establishment in 2002. There have been cases when member states requested help. In 2010, interim president of Kyrgyzstan Roza Otunbayeva pleaded for the CSTO’s intervention after the fall of Bakiyev’s regime; but, firstly, it was entirely domestic matter, and, secondly, there was no formal legitimate power to protect in Bishkek. In 2021, Armenia requested the CSTO’s help during the escalation of the conflict with Azerbaijan. The organisation declined the request, because Nagorno-Karabakh is officially a part of Azerbaijan. The CSTO also refrained from involvement in the 2018 Armenian revolution as well as the violent Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflicts, calling the latter an entirely bilateral issue.

Kazakhstan’s precedent is unique in another way too: as experts argue, before this case, there had been no oil-rich, highly educated country with vast territory that had to seek its neighbours’ military help to deal with ordinary street protests. [\(8\)](#)

Interestingly, if American-style foreign interventions prioritised democracy and human rights over sovereignty and independence, Russian-style interventions take place to help existing authoritarian regimes maintain power.

We know nothing about the circumstances, which party, whether it was Russian or Kazakh, made the decision, or how this was done. But one thing can be said for sure: the Russian political machine is highly personalised, and nothing could have been said or done without Putin’s involvement.

Tokayev's foresight and political wit should not be underestimated either. He might be portrayed as dependent and non-autonomous; but he is in fact a diplomat with excellent education and skills and years of experience as foreign minister (1994–1999, 2002–2007). Moreover, he knows how to balance relationships with all parties: after he became president, he refused to call the seizure of Crimea by Russia “annexation,” and did not criticise China for its repressions against the Uyghurs; at the same time, he has good working relationships with Europe. In addition to Russian and Kazakh, he speaks Chinese, English and French. Thus, one should not underrate his ability to negotiate and reach agreements for personal benefit.

Interestingly, law enforcement and security agencies could not or did not want to do their job. Practically unarmed protesters seized the National Security Committee building, the airport in Almaty and other strategic locations, where they found arms that were used in further riots. This indicates that security forces were not loyal to Tokayev; otherwise, they would have fulfilled their duty of protecting strategically important places.

The consequences of the CSTO involvement are obvious.

- Whether Nazarbayev left willingly or was sidelined, his era is over. No video or statement has been released, and no one knows where he is. But frankly, it does not matter anymore. It does not matter that he supported economic integration with Russia and was among its most staunch allies; politics is pragmatic and guided by the interests of its actors, not by their personal affinities or past merits. Nazarbayev ruled the country since the fall of the Soviet Union, and he is one of the last leaders wrapping up the post-Soviet transformational period.
- By inviting the CSTO to support his presidential credentials, Tokayev potentially lost his autonomy from Moscow both politically and economically. Now that he has received an opportunity to push away Nazarbayev's tycoons, Russian oil and gas companies, such as Lukoil and Gazprom, will be eager to fill the vacuum and expand their presence in the country.
- The involvement of the CSTO in the settlement of a domestic political crisis is unprecedented, and may become a turning point not only for the organisation itself, but also for the whole Central Asian region and the post-Soviet space. For instance, in Belarus, whose president, Alexandr Lukoshenko, has been in office since 1994, domestic political peace is fragile to say the least - although it will not be surprising if Russia abandons him in the next uprising, as it did Nazarbayev.

Similarly, the Armenian president, Nikol Pashinyan, hinted that he does not mind the involvement of the CSTO in Armenian-Azerbaijani affairs when he said, “Unfortunately, we must state that there is no decrease in tension in the CSTO area of responsibility, and we continue to face new types of

threats. In the recent past, we ourselves faced the emergence of foreign terrorists and fighters in our region.” [\(9\)](#)

Conclusion

Clearly, none of the states in the region, especially Russia and China, who have invested too much in Kazakhstan, want to see it become another Kyrgyzstan or Ukraine. Its geopolitical position, size and energy resources are too important to allow it to slide into the rank of failure states.

Surprisingly, the peacekeeping mission of CSTO, whose main participant is Russia, finished in under a week, preventing the collapse of statehood. Russia’s imperative here was not to impose a puppet government, but to preserve an integral, stable and independent state with sane political leadership.

Tokayev was not only able to retain his presidential post, but also, most importantly, in people’s eyes, he distanced himself from the old elites and gained credibility to get rid of the tycoons and appointees of Nazarbayev’s era.

As always the case in the post-Soviet space, Tokayev promised a fairer distribution of wealth and liberalisation. Practically, such promises are more often forgotten than put into action, and at most, result in the reallocation of assets to new elites. In 2001, when he was prime minister, he was the key figure crushing the Democratic Movement of Kazakhstan, a group of politicians who demanded reforms and democratization. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that he will build a more inclusive system. [\(10\)](#)

However, only the people of Kazakhstan should be responsible for the future of the state. Political stability and economic well-being are impossible without a new social contract, which cannot be created without the participation of all parties.

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