The Moscow Times
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No Clear Successor in Sight as Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev Turns 75

By The Moscow Times

July 06, 2015



Graduates pose and take pictures in front of a statue of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev at the First President's Park in Almaty, Kazakhstan, July 3, 2015.

ASTANA/ALMAT — Kazakhstan's veteran leader Nursultan Nazarbayev celebrates his 75th birthday on Monday, in good shape and vastly popular, but the expected fireworks and fanfare mask uncomfortable questions about the future of the second-largest post-Soviet economy.

Nicknamed "Papa" and officially titled "Leader of the Nation," he extended his 26-year reign in April by another five years, "apologising" to his critics for cornering 97.7 percent of the vote in an early election which Western observers said offered no real alternative.

With sweeping powers that enable him to keep a tight lid on dissent, the former steelworker prides himself on maintaining discipline and stability in his mainly Muslim country of 17.5 million while overseeing market reforms.

He justifies his iron grip on power by saying it safeguards his Central Asian nation, with a population including Kazakhs, Russians, Ukrainians, ethnic Germans and Tatars, from the shocks that have led to turmoil in other ex-Soviet nations.

"Tell me, does anyone here in Kazakhstan want a repeat of what happened in Ukraine, or in Georgia, or in Moldova? Does anyone want to see this here?" he said to a question about ceding some of his presidential powers to parliament.

"These countries all have parliamentary republics," Nazarbayev said in a documentary made specially for his birthday and aired on July 1.

Most of his opponents have been jailed or have fled abroad but Nazarbayev pays little heed to human rights groups which criticise him for crackdowns on freedom of speech and assembly.

In 2011, he showed his readiness to adopt openly tough measures to curb dissent when a strike over pay and conditions in the oil town of Zhanaozen and a nearby village, escalated to riots.

Police shot dead at least 15 people and a critic of the president was later jailed for more than seven years on charges of rallying oil workers to try to topple the government.

Allowed by the law to run for president as many times as he wants, he has said that he will groom a successor for himself.

But, unnerving the vast business community which has invested more than $200 billion in the oil-rich nation since independence, he has not dropped the slightest hint about who this might be.

However, even if he officially leaves the stage one day, his status of "Leader of the Nation" will still allow him to play a key role in ruling the nation.

"Many, including investors, say: 'May this system just not get worse'," said Kazakh political analyst Dosym Satpayev. "They see that the system is not ideal, but at least it's stable."

Since 2008, the Day of the Capital Astana has been timed to fall on his birthday, ensuring it is always a national holiday.

The new capital, moved from Almaty in the south to northern windswept steppeland that was once home to Stalin-era Gulag concentration camps, is his brainchild project.

Brightly illuminated and packed with oddly-shaped sky-scrapers, the futuristic city has become a symbol of Kazakhstan's economic growth. Critics point to social inequality in a nation five times the size of France and rich in oil and minerals, from uranium to copper.

Between East and West

Displaying his art of political manoeuvring, Nazarbayev has built good relations with both the far-flung European Union and the United States, and neighbours Russia and China.

He has weathered Western criticism for backtracking on pledges of democratic reform; but he

has proven a reliable strategic partner in the volatile region bordering Afghanistan and attracts massive investment from European and U.S. companies.

He has opened up the lucrative oil sector to Chinese companies, won Chinese loans to modernise local industries and overseen a sharp rise in mutual trade.

Crucially, he enjoys warm ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin. After Ukraine's pro-European street protests and Russia's annexation of Crimea, he told the Kremlin leader last March he "treats with understanding" the logic of his actions.

He enthusiastically embraced the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union, which includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, despite critics' view of it as Moscow's attempt to restore as much as possible of the former Soviet Union.

After Putin said last August that Kazakhstan had never existed as a state before Nazarbayev, the latter reacted calmly, declaring 2015 the year of the 550th anniversary of the Kazakh Khanate.

Even Nazarbayev's most outspoken critics recognise his efforts in solidifying Kazakhstan's sovereignty and preserving stability and inter-ethnic peace.

"However, there is this huge drawback — his flourishing personality cult, which simply discredits the country and the president himself," said opposition activist Amirzhan Kosanov.

"I have a feeling Nazarbayev does not know himself how the structure of state power will be shaped if he steps down."

It appears that for Nazarbayev, one thing is certain already — he has reserved a place for himself in history.

"I believe that whatever we, our generation, are doing, will remain in the memory of our people forever," he told the documentary about his jubilee. "When you work, you will always be criticised. This is normal."

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