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Turmoil in Kazakhstan Heralds the End of the Nazarbayev Era

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The protests in Kazakhstan have shown that the current model of governance has angered millions of people who missed out when the resources pie was shared out. Yet that model is such an intrinsic part of the country's economic and political structure that the leadership is unlikely to be able to change it, should President Tokayev wish to do so.



Almaty, Kazakhstan. **Valery Sharifulin / TASS**

As recently as last year, Kazakhstan was considered a progressive autocracy: a model for other former Soviet republics, no less. The power transition model launched there in 2019 had attracted keen interest from Moscow. Just a few days into 2022, that has all changed. At least 164 people have been killed in the worst mass unrest the country has seen since it gained independence from the Soviet Union, and the ruling regime has been forced to appeal for help to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO): i.e., to Russia.

Amid the chaos of unfolding events, some important details are impossible to ascertain, but

one thing is clear: the era of former president Nursultan Nazarbayev's control of Kazakhstan has come to an end.

The crisis began at the start of the year with protests in Western Kazakhstan against fuel prices, which had doubled since a government price cap was lifted. From January 3, the protests spread in just twenty-four hours—aided by social media — across the entire country in an explosion of general discontent.

The root of the current protests lies in the fact that in the past two years, the material well-being of many Kazakhs has noticeably deteriorated. Inflation rose to 8.9% in 2021 from 7.5% in 2020. It was even higher on food items: 11.3% in 2020 and 10.9% in the first eleven months of 2021. In 2020, the amount of personal borrowing hit a record high, growing 12.3 percent from the previous year.

The pandemic has hit Kazakhstan's labor market hard. According to an express poll by the Eurasian Economic Union, the official unemployment rate went up by 12 percent in 2021. The worst hit were domestic migrants, mostly young men (the average age in Kazakhstan is less than thirty-two) who move to big cities from the provinces to find work. Many of them lost a significant proportion of their income because of strict lockdowns imposed over the pandemic. At the same time, a fall in oil prices in the first half of 2020 impacted budget revenues, meaning the government's ability to extinguish the smoldering dissatisfaction by throwing money at it was also limited.

Violence in Almaty

The most popular destination for domestic migrants in Kazakhstan, other than the capital Nur-Sultan, is the former capital Almaty. It's not surprising, therefore, that Almaty became the center of the protests. Of more than 1,300 protests held in Kazakhstan from 2018 to June 2021, most took place in Almaty. The city has also seen a rise in its crime rate, which quadrupled from 2007 to 2017.

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The large number of frustrated young men with nothing to lose is the most likely explanation for how quickly the protests became radicalized and turned violent. Protesters clashed with law enforcement, and the looting began, fueled by cheap booze consumed during the New Year celebrations and apparently carried out mainly by angry and impoverished young men from the city, as well as local villages and small towns in southern Kazakhstan.

Crowds in Almaty robbed weapons stores and supermarkets, raided ATMs, torched cars, and seized armored military vehicles. They also stormed the local administration building, the prosecutor's office, the National Security Committee building, TV studios, and other sites, with many left gutted or burned down. Almaty's airport was also occupied for several hours. The evidence available so far suggests that the armed protesters had no strategic objectives beyond chaos and looting: the administrative buildings were burned and ransacked, but no one attempted to hold them afterwards. Nor were any political demands put forward by the rioters. The lack of centralized leadership of multiple gangs and absence of a political agenda other than mayhem is key here, but decades of the Kazakh government stifling real

opposition also played a role.

In his national address on Jan. 7 and during a CSTO virtual summit on January 10, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev claimed that the actions of "terrorists and thugs" were part of an attempted coup d'etat from within, and that they were backed by hostile foreign forces, though he has not pointed the finger at any countries in particular.

A commission to investigate the events has already been announced, but it's unlikely to be able to provide an objective answer to the question of whether the protests were entirely spontaneous, or whether they had organizers either at home or abroad. In his address, the president was already anticipating the results of the investigation when he accused foreign forces of coordinating the protests. It's clear that the commission's findings will suit the regime, or to be more specific, Tokayev himself, whose role in Kazakhstan's power system has changed in the last week, as well as those leaders of the security establishment who can now blame their own failures on powerful enemies within and their foreign backers.

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The End of the Tandem

The situation in Kazakhstan could still play out in different ways, but for now, it looks as though President Tokayev is the biggest winner from the current crisis. Until recently, he was the junior partner in Kazakhstan's ruling tandem, in which the leader was his predecessor Nursultan Nazarbayev, who ruled the country from its independence for nearly thirty years. The sixty-eight-year-old Tokayev found himself at the top of the country's official power pyramid back in 2019 as the result of a power transition operation put in motion by the now eighty-one-year-old Nazarbayev shortly after the death of neighboring Uzbekistan's president Islam Karimov in 2016.

Having seen first-hand what the sudden death of an authoritarian leader can mean for their legacy and family (one of Karimov's daughters, Gulnara, was arrested while her father was still alive and is serving a lengthy prison sentence, while the other got rid of all major assets in Uzbekistan and does not show her face there), Nazarbayev began to prepare for a controlled handover of power. The first step was to appoint Karim Masimov, the most trusted member of his team, who had previously headed up the government and presidential administration, head of the National Security Committee (KNB), the country's most powerful security service.

Despite Nazarbayev's trust in him, Masimov could not be a contender for the role of his successor because of prejudice against him in Kazakhstan, where the public opinion is that Masimov is a Uyghur, rather than a full ethnic Kazakh. Instead, he was selected as the ideal candidate to oversee the power transition from atop the KNB.

After wavering for a long time, Nazarbayev chose Tokayev, a loyal career diplomat, as his successor. Having spent many years working abroad, Tokayev lacked his own team of people within the power structure who might have posed a threat to Nazarbayev.

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Having shocked the nation by stepping down from the presidency in 2019, Nazarbayev kept control of both formal and informal levers of power. A law on the status of the first president of post-Soviet Kazakhstan guaranteed his personal security, while as chair of the Security Council, he retained a huge amount of authority: he could effectively not only set the country's strategic course, but also veto many of his successor's decisions. Nazarbayev's influence was enhanced by having Masimov heading up the KNB, and a coterie of his other protégés in other key positions of power.

The ruling tandem in Kazakhstan appeared to be working without any crises: at least, none discernible to outside observers, though insiders reported growing tensions between the two leaders' offices. Nazarbayev's health has been a key factor in the tandem power dynamics. As the first president's health started to deteriorate, Tokayev's power and control over the national bureaucracy began to grow. Over the course of the last two years, particularly since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, Nazarbayev has made only sporadic public appearances, and was visibly ailing.

The current protests have given Tokayev a sudden opportunity to shatter the mainstays of the dual power system. First, he fired the entire government, headed by Askar Mamin, a Nazarbayev-era heavyweight.. Then Tokayev announced that he, and not the former president, would be heading the Security Council from now on (a week after Nazarbayev's press secretary said that the former president had authorized the move in order to give Tokayev full control amid the extraordinary conditions). On January 5, the final blow was inflicted when Masimov was relieved of his duties and replaced with Ermek Sagimbayev, who until last summer led Tokayev's security detail.

Masimov has since been arrested and officially charged with state treason. Prosecutors are building a case against the former security tsar for allegedly orchestrating an attempt to size power and topple Tokayev. If the regime choses to prosecute Masimov for an alleged coup d'etat, despite its quite illogical and unorthodox nature (most real attempts at taking power by security chiefs start and end in the capital with the elimination of the current leader), it will be easy for the government to prove his guilt, since all the courts are part of the power vertical.

Still, just because Tokayev may turn out to be the biggest beneficiary of the current crisis, that's not to say that he was behind it. What's more likely is that the president has simply taken advantage of the sudden opportunity to consolidate power in his hands. One sign that the current crisis was unexpected for the regime is Tokayev's decision to ask for help in restoring order from Kazakhstan's allies within the CSTO, primarily the Russian security services.

Reform Without Change?

The Kazakh government was visibly unable to stop the unrest in big cities on its own. The initial security crisis in Almaty and other southern cities that exposed the inefficiency of Kazakhstan's security services and the poor coordination among them was most likely exacerbated by the New Year holiday period, as many officials and security service commanders were on vacation abroad or recovering from the celebrations at home. It should come as no surprise that the regime has put the blame for the unrest on "terrorists." This

formulation allowed Tokayev to ask for help from the CSTO, whose remit does not cover purely internal conflicts. The alliance agreed to help on the night of January 5, and just a few hours later, the first planes carrying Russian, Belarusian, Tajik, and Armenian peacekeepers started arriving in Kazakhstan.

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Asking for outside help to resolve what is essentially an internal conflict was a risky move. Nationalist sentiment is growing in Kazakhstan with every year. The president's enemies could present the invitation extended to Russian troops as an attempt by Tokayev to use foreign military force to hold onto power. Accusations of this nature are already being expressed both in Kazakhstan and in the Kazakh diaspora in Russia.

What precisely prompted Tokayev to take such a risky step is a matter of conjecture. It's possible that the president looked at the demoralized army and police officers and began to doubt that he had enough loyal *siloviki*, or security service officials, to restore order, especially during a change in leadership within the security services. In this context, appealing to the CSTO for help would seem like a lesser risk than losing control over Almaty and other major cities.

After the initial explosion of unrest, the crowds of protesters became noticeably smaller, as many people shut themselves away at home, frightened by the violence.

By the evening of Jan. 5, the government had regained control of key sites around the country and was carrying out targeted operations in Almaty and other major centers of the armed riots. It looks like Kazakhstan's own *siloviki* can continue to regain control over the country with minimal help from their CSTO colleagues, who were deployed to play a supporting role of patrol and protection, not to exchange gunfire with the rioters. The troops from Russia and other countries will most likely return home soon, just as it was announced they would ahead of the operation's launch.

In that case, both Tokayev and Moscow will emerge as winners. The president will have shown Kazakhstan's people, elites, and neighbors that he is capable of building pragmatic relations with the Kremlin that make it possible not only to call on Russian *siloviki* for assistance, but also to return them once they are no longer needed.

Moscow, for its part, will have killed several birds with one stone.

First, it will have helped preserve a friendly regime in Kazakhstan: a key Russian foreign policy goal to be achieved by any means. Second, it will have boosted the authority of the CSTO, which had been damaged by recent events in Kyrgyzstan and Nagorno-Karabakh. Not so long ago, many thought that the organization and its collective power to respond swiftly existed only on paper; now it has shown it can take action when needed. And a multilateral peacekeeping operation looks even better than if Russian troops had had to intervene on their own. Finally, a successful operation will show that only Russia can play the role of an external security guarantor in Central Asia, and that neither visits by U.S. generals to the region, nor Chinese outposts in the depths of Tajikistan can change that.

As for Kazakhstan itself, the main outcome of current events, whatever else happens, will be the end of Nazarbayev's long reign. So far, two important aspects of his legacy are clear. First and foremost, the system he built has made it possible to keep the elite more or less consolidated, despite the inevitable struggle for power and money. There were conflicts under Nazarbayev, of course: his own former son-in-law Rakhat Aliyev fell out with the president and died in a Vienna prison cell in mysterious circumstances. Still, an all-out war looks less likely right now than a relatively smooth transition from a system with Nazarbayev at its center to a system that revolves around Tokayev. So far it looks like the only political victim of the events will be Masimov and his entourage, who will be made scapegoats for the most violent security crisis in Kazakhstan's recent history. Nazarbayev's relatives are still part of the political landscape, although their role is likely to gradually diminish along with the power of their patron.

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The second aspect of Nazarbayev's legacy revealed by the protests is that the current model of governance in place in Kazakhstan has a multitude of defects that have angered millions of people who missed out when the resources pie was shared out. Yet that model is so intrinsically woven into the structure of the country's economy and political life that the new government (to be announced shortly) is unlikely to be able to change it, should President Tokayev wish to do so.

It's unlikely, however, that the new Kazakh leadership has any such ambition: a strong, centralized government is seen as a pillar of the nation whose demolition would lead first to a similar situation to that in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, and in the longer term, to the country's collapse.

In the post-Soviet space, experience has shown that protests like those currently under way in Kazakhstan lead not to reform, but to a crackdown by the regime, as they have in Russia and Belarus. Tokayev has already pledged to hold to account not only the alleged terrorists, but also those who instigated the unrest from among liberal activists and (for now) independent media.

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