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Kazakhstan Says Foiled Coup Attempt Ahead of Early Vote

By AFP

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Kazakh banker Mukhtar Ablyazov. **Alexander Turnbull / AP / TASS**

Kazakhstan said Thursday it had prevented a coup attempt by supporters of an exiled opposition figure as it arrested seven people ahead of a presidential election this weekend.

On Sunday, Kazakhstan will hold a snap presidential vote expected to cement incumbent Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's grip on power, months after deadly unrest shook the Central Asian country and left more than 230 people dead.

The National Security Committee said a group of seven people planned to "organize riots and a coup and proclaim a provisional government," adding that the suspects "share the views of exiled opponent Mukhtar Ablyazov."

Ablyazov, a former energy minister and bank chairman, is a hugely controversial figure whom Kazakhstan has tried and sentenced in absentia for murder and embezzlement.

The France-based Ablyazov has vociferously encouraged protests through his social media channels.

The security service said the group was trying to organize large-scale riots and planning to attack administrative buildings and law enforcement offices with arms and projectiles.

Weapons including Kalashnikov assault rifles, sawn-off shotguns, ammunition and materials for Molotov cocktails as well as walkie-talkies were confiscated, it said.

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Tokayev, 69, became leader in 2019 and has stymied opposition and consolidated power by sidelining his authoritarian predecessor Nursultan Nazarbayev after the January unrest.

He has touted himself as a reforming leader capable of uniting the country.

Earlier this year, he had empowered law enforcement personnel with "shoot to kill" orders.

The vast, ex-Soviet country is precariously perched geopolitically, with historic economic and military ties with Moscow coming under strain over Ukraine and Beijing emerging as a regional power broker.

Tokayev has vowed to build "a new Kazakhstan" by liberalizing the judicial system, tackling corruption and undertaking reforms.

But deep social inequality that was at the origin of the January protests remains a problem and a potential political threat.

Tokayev is facing five little-known challengers as he seeks a seven-year term in the early vote he initiated in September, saying he needed a "new mandate of trust from the people."

Elections were initially set for December 2024, but in March, he introduced constitutional reforms to curb the powers of the president and boost the role of parliament, sparking the early ballot.

'No real choice'

Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have criticized Kazakhstan's failure to meet electoral recommendations, including "conditions of eligibility and registration of candidates."

"There is no credible candidate. There is no real choice. I'll be voting against all of them," said Asset Terirgaliyev, a retired resident of the country's economic capital, Almaty, the city which was an epicenter of the riots and subsequent repression.

"These elections are a farce," architect Aidar Ergaly told AFP.

"Had Tokayev said: 'I'm annulling the vote. I'm staying in power for seven years — or however long I want — and then I'll go,' I would respect him for his honesty."

Political analyst Andrei Chebotarev said the January violence, which he said put the country "on the brink of a civil war," had also brought about a "change of the foundations of society and the state."

Balancing act

"A little time has passed and we don't see any real changes yet," said pensioner Svetlana Kadysheva.

Janiya Nakizbekova, a 57-year-old entrepreneur, was more optimistic.

"We have great hope in Tokayev and believe that he cares more about the people than Nazarbayev did."

The International Monetary Fund has warned of the persistent risk of instability as Kazakhstan's economy — heavily dependent on Russia — is suffering from the impact of the war in Ukraine.

A former diplomat, Tokayev has won a reputation as a shrewd politician and is expected to continue performing a balancing act between the West, Russia and China.

He has also criticized Moscow's invasion of Ukraine but stopped short of joining Western sanctions on Russia.

About 12 million people are eligible to vote. Polling stations open Sunday at 1:00 a.m. GMT and close at 3:00 p.m. GMT.

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