

Tough Times Ahead for Kazakhstan

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SUMMARY

- All of Kazakhstan's politicians recognize the need for change, even those who are happy with the way things are now, or who find change difficult to initiate. Kazakhstan's political elite is firmly set on change because it is the most essential condition for ensuring the elite's continued rule.
- In 2011, Kazakhstan went through upheavals unprecedented in its independent history: an upsurge in Islamist activity, terrorist attacks, and the events in Zhanaozen, which claimed numerous lives. These events have all forced the ruling elite to give serious thought to economic and perhaps political change.
- An opposition has not emerged in Kazakhstani society. Neither the events in Zhanaozen nor the Islamist groups' active-ness have received broad public support. This is as much due to the preventive measures taken by the authorities as to Kazakhstani society simply not yet being ready for protest.
- Nazarbayev's Nur Otan party won a convincing victory in the parliamentary election, as was expected. The election results were unchallenged, despite the irregularities that took place during the election preparations and the election itself.
- Although integration within the Eurasian Union seems to be progressing well, the future of Russia-Kazakhstan relations will depend in large part upon the domestic situation in both countries. There is the risk that in the event of crisis, Moscow (and Minsk) could resort to protectionist measures. Changes in domestic policy in Russia brought on by protests, as well as possible change in Kazakhstan, could also affect the two countries' foreign policy and the development of their relations.

There was never any shortage of attention paid to Kazakhstan by politicians and analysts. Interest in the country is on the increase today, due to changes looming on the horizon there and the emergence of new trends in its development.

First in this context is the expected leadership change and arrival of a new leader. His name is not yet known, but his steps have already long been sounding in the corridors of power. Kazakhstan's next leader will not be a novice from amongst the ranks of the



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country's minor politicians, but someone whose name the public knows.

The question is, of course, when the successor's name will be announced, and when he will actually take over the president's seat. True, speaking in January 2012 at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London, on the eve of the elections, Yermukhamet Yertysbayev, an adviser to the president, said that the incumbent president "has a mandate until December 2016 and has no plans to step down from office."¹ This can be taken as both a desire to avoid giving a direct answer and as evidence that Nazarbayev has not yet made a final decision.

Behind the intrigue surrounding the future successor and transfer of power is an even more acute, if less provocative, issue: that of Kazakhstan's future itself. In other words, has the present course come to its end, and is Nazarbayev capable of making fundamental changes, or will such changes, despite the big post-election promises – in particular those outlined in the presidential address to the nation – be put on the back burner?

All of Kazakhstan's politicians realize the need for change, even those who find it psychologically difficult to actually start implementing them, because they are either content with things as they are (they personally are wealthy and happy), or because they are simply too old. "Kazakhstan's current ruling class has returned full circle to where it began – in the authoritarian late-Soviet past that tolerated no competition." Nazarbayev himself, "like many aging autocrats, lives on a completely

different planet and follows a logic of his own," states head of the Fergana.ru website Daniil Kislov.² There is a fair amount of truth in this judgment, but also a share of exaggeration. Kazakhstan's ruling class is not monolithic. Competing groups exist within it. Nazarbayev himself, who can without any doubt be credited with playing a part in building the new nation-state of Kazakhstan, which had never existed before, is by no means completely cut off from the real situation in the country.

Unlike Russia's ruling elite, the Kazakhstani elite realize implicitly that they cannot turn to the past (Soviet, Orthodox, or whatever else) to find a way out of the crisis, because Kazakhstan simply never had any past as a nation state. They therefore instinctively link their own survival and that of their country exclusively with the future and modernization (which in Kazakhstan, unlike in Russia, is not an empty word). Finally, unlike Russia, Kazakhstan does not have similar bottomless resources to feed the political class's irresponsibility (if Vladimir Putin remains president for a quarter of a century he will inevitably push Russia into disaster, and by the time he reaches Nazarbayev's age, he will most likely lose all ability to form an adequate understanding of the surrounding world).

In a way (even if the comparison is not entirely appropriate), Kazakhstan is closer to the monarchies of the Persian Gulf, which have realized that their energy resources are finite and cannot serve as the only foundation upon which to build their countries'

prosperity. Officials in Almaty and Astana are at least worried to see that the share of oil and petroleum products in their exports rose from 53 percent in 2000 to almost 70 percent in 2008, turning the country into a “raw materials appendage.”

Kazakhstan’s businesspeople and politicians are more pragmatic than their Russian counterparts. The Kazakhstani political and business elite have thrown off their infantile self-confidence and are preparing for the economic and political difficulties ahead. Prime Minister Karim Masimov, who remains at his post, though many predicted that he would be ousted after the extraordinary parliamentary election, takes the view that “a second wave of the crisis will be inevitable and will come in 2012-2013.” He is aware of the negative impact this could have and knows that Kazakhstan will require “macro-economic stability” to overcome these consequences, while the country’s “second priority is to fight unemployment.”³ Masimov’s opponents criticize him on many points, but he can at least take credit for not following a populist line and for admitting that the country can expect to go through some difficult years.

In 2011, Kazakhstan went through upheavals unprecedented in its independent history, starting with the oil workers’ strike in Zhanaozen, which began in May and produced a social explosion that was suppressed by force, leaving dozens dead and wounded. The year also saw a number of deadly terrorist attacks orga-

nized by Islamist groups, including Junud Alla – a group that gained notoriety over the last year. In the words of Kazakh analyst Dosym Satpayev, the country is starting to turn into the militants’ “rear base,” where they can hide to “lick their wounds.”⁴ “Extremism is not spreading around the country from any one single center... Terrorist attacks can happen in any city and there is no regional specificity here.”⁵ The extremists print their leaflets in Russian, hoping to reach an “international audience.”

Among the likely upcoming changes in Kazakhstan could be arrival of a new leader. His name is not yet known, but his steps have already long been sounding in the corridors of power. Kazakhstan’s next leader will not be a novice from amongst the ranks of the country’s minor politicians, but someone whose name the public knows. The question is, of course, when the successor’s name will be announced, and when he will actually take over the president’s seat.

It is also worth mentioning such seemingly trivial details as the notice posted on the Almaty central mosque’s website at the very end of 2011, warning that the New Year is not an Islamic holiday. Looking at this in the context of calls not to celebrate the New Year in Dagestan, the murder of a man dressed in a Grandfather Frost costume in Dushanbe, and similar events, there is evidence of Islamic radicalization in the post-Soviet space (this trend can be generalized even further if the explosions in five churches in Nigeria just before Christmas are included), and also evidence that, despite the earlier

view that Kazakhstan was “distanced” from the Islamic issues, it has now been drawn into the general Islamization trend. The authorities are starting to wake up to this development, which has major implications for the country and its society.

But at the same time, it is clear that neither the events in Zhanaozen nor the Islamist groups’ activeness have found wide support among the public. It is not simply that the authorities managed to take preventive measures to stop the protests from spreading further, but also that Kazakhstan’s society was not ready for large-scale protest. There was no social or religious solidarity in evidence. It is hard to assess

the authorities should respond to the events in Zhanaozen by “building a social state.”⁷ It is interesting that leading political figures’ analysis of the events stands in stark contrast to the numerous declarations in the official media, attributing the social unrest to “the West’s hidden hand at work”⁸ (remarkably similar in their primitivism to the pathetic texts churned out by official Russian propagandists).

Evidence that there is no broad-based protest mood in society can be seen not only in the election results that gave a convincing – and expected – victory to Nazarbayev’s Nur Otan party, but also in the fact that the public did not contest either that victory or the violations during the preparation and organization of the vote. Juan Suarez, the head of the OSCE parliamentary assembly observers’ mission, said that despite the government’s declarations that it wants to develop the democratic process in Kazakhstan and hold elections in accordance with OSCE obligations, the extraordinary parliamentary election does not measure up to the fundamental principles of democratic elections.⁹ In Kazakhstan itself this assessment proved no more than a voice crying in the wilderness. Unlike in Russia, where election fraud in the 2011 parliamentary election brought tens of thousands of people into the streets, the election in Kazakhstan showed society’s inertness.

The question of Nazarbayev’s emigré political opponents having a hand in the events in Zhanaozen or in religious extremist acts is also an issue to be addressed. Various views have been

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the protest forces’ future chances of consolidating and creating a broader-based opposition, but the ruling class realizes this is possible and is trying to stay one step ahead.

Evaluating the events in Zhanaozen, Masimov admitted that “This is the first time Kazakhstan has seen a conflict of this level. There are many reasons for the conflict, some more evident, others deeper. The root causes of this situation go deep.” At the same time, he added that “There is social tension in Zhanaozen, but not throughout the country as a whole.”⁶ Yertysbayev, for his part, said that

expressed. If some politicians who have gone abroad, for example, former Prime Minister Akezhan Kazhegeldin, seem unlikely to want to dive back into local political intrigue, others, such as Nazarbayev's son-in-law Rakhat Aliyev and media oligarch Mukhtar Ablyazov, could well be tempted. In the view of Central Asia expert Martha Olcott, however, Ablyazov's influence is in no way comparable to that of disgraced oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky in Russia, for all Ablyazov's pretensions to play a similar role in his country.

Even if Kazakhstan's society is passive for now, and perhaps, indeed, because it is passive, I agree with the view of Kazakhstan-based expert Nikolai Kuzmin, who said that since the events at Zhanaozen, Kazakhstan has lost its stability, which in that country *is felt more keenly than anywhere else* (italics mine – A. M.) “It became clear last year that the people of Kazakhstan will from now on have to live in a world that has lost its familiar soothing features of security, tolerance, and stability. Our society has found itself face to face with extremism in various forms – from terrorist attacks to open calls to ban the use of the Russian language.”¹⁰ The people of Kazakhstan are not ready for this and their reaction in the event of a repeat of similar excesses could be unpredictably sharp.

Compared to the events in Zhanaozen and Islamic radicals' activeness, the Russian language issue looks not so important, and yet it is also very symptomatic of the overall situation. A whiff of nationalism came through in the programs and actions of several

political parties during the parliamentary election campaign. In September 2011, the Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan, the Ruhaniyat party, the social-democratic party Azat, and the democratic party of Kazakhstan Ak Zhol signed the 138 Appeal, calling for an end to the official status that the current constitution gives the Russian language (it is used in official documents on an equal basis with

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Kazakh). Analysts see these parties as having put together a sort of “national-patriotic quartet.” At the same time, the democratic party Adilet has drifted towards the Islamic movements over the last two to three years. Just before the elections, Murat Telibekov, head of the Union of Muslims of Kazakhstan, joined Adilet; in November 2011, he declared: “People are starting to realize that you can talk to the authorities only from a position of force.”¹¹

These parties do not have much influence and only one of them, Ak Zhol, the “shadow” of the ruling Nur Otan party, made it into the parliament. However, the rising nationalist factor cannot be ignored. First, increasing nationalism is not something specific to Kazakhstan. Indeed, ethno-nationalist moods are common throughout the post-Soviet region, including Central Asia. Second, if the situation worsens, such sentiments will become more

popular, and any party or movement can make overt or tacit use of them. If this happens, it would lead to increasing tension in the country. Recent history shows that when power is being carved up, appeals by various political forces to ethnocentrism or religion are almost inevitable.

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Sooner or later changes will begin. They have a head start in the form of a priori support for Nazarbayev in Europe and the U.S., which are willing to forgive Nazarbayev's regime much because, unlike its Central Asian neighbors, Kazakhstan for a long while was truly moving along the path of reforms. Nobody brings up "Kazakhgate"¹² or the 95.5 percent result in the 2007 presidential election, which had no effect on Kazakhstan's presidency in the OSCE. The Kazakh authorities' actions in Zhanaozen are not being compared to Tashkent's suppression of the demonstrations in Andijan in 2005, for which Uzbekistan was subjected to criticism and sanctions.

In this respect, the proponents of a renewed course of reform have their hands free and can be sure of support from outside, which would be particularly important if the reforms destabilize the situation, which cannot be ruled out, and the authorities find themselves having to take tough measures against sections of the popu-

lation whose interests are affected and whose living standards have decreased for a time.

Russia has a particular interest in what turn the developments in Kazakhstan will take. Over the twenty years since the USSR's disintegration, an established view has emerged that the Central Asian countries fall clearly enough into two groups: a pro-Russian group made up of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; and a Russia-skeptic group made up of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. For all its seeming self-evidence, this approach does not provide a full understanding of the nature of Kazakhstan-Russia relations. Certainly, the two countries have strong and stable ties, but it should be kept in mind that these ties are based above all on mutual pragmatic interest. The way Russia has been developing and the regime that has emerged here suit Kazakhstan. The same can be said of Russia with regard to Kazakhstan. Today's often-mentioned notions of historical mutual attraction, Eurasian vision and so on are convenient ideological constructs (although Kazakhstan is perhaps the only country where the Eurasian idea has a deeper, that is to say more rational sense to it). Furthermore, the nature of the two countries' respective economic and political systems also plays a part in shaping the degree of closeness in their relations, and if these systems undergo evolution, the resulting transformations could also change the nature of relations between the two countries.

In this context, the integration developments that took place in 2011

must also be mentioned. In November, Presidents Alexander Lukashenko, Dmitry Medvedev, and Nursultan Nazarbayev signed the Declaration on Eurasian Economic Integration, which is supposed to culminate in the establishment of the Eurasian Union in 2015. They also signed the Agreement on the Eurasian Economic Commission, which, starting on January 1, 2012, became a common, permanent supranational body regulating relations within the Customs Union and the common economic area. But the future of the Eurasian Union, which is based primarily on Kazakhstan-Russia bilateral relations (with Belarus tacked on) depends entirely on the way these relations develop.

On the outside, the relations seem very favorable. Nazarbayev has said in the past that integration is the only possible choice. Commenting on the Nur Otan party's victory in the Kazakh parliamentary election, Chairman of Russia's State Duma committee for CIS affairs Leonid Slutsky said that it "confirms the course of general integration with Russia and construction of the Eurasian Union."¹³ But some Kazakhstani politicians and experts voice more cautious opinions with regard to the Eurasian Union. They worry, in particular, that in the event of a new crisis, Moscow (and Minsk) might resort to protectionist measures (the common economic area's supranational committee was established precisely to avoid this risk). One of the toughest questions is that of introducing a common currency. In Masimov's view, "It is not something

we should undertake right now... It is an issue for the distant future."¹⁴

It is hard to predict what the more distant future will look like. Meanwhile, politicians and experts in Russia are certain that the upsurge in public awareness and increased activity by the opposition forces will force the authorities, no matter who they are, to change domestic policy. Similar views have been heard in Kazakhstan following the events in Zhanaozen and extremist acts by Islamist groups. Domestic policy inevitably also influences foreign policy.

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Martha Olcott described the events in Zhanaozen as a wake-up call for President Nazarbayev and the ruling elite that political institutions need to be strengthened "for the leader of the nation to successfully transfer power and secure his place in Kazakh history."¹⁵

Kazakhstan has an opportunity for positive change. Though less clear for now, the same opportunity could emerge in Russia too if the conditions are right. The hard part will be making good use of it.

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NOTES

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² D. Kislov, “Zachyem Nazarbayevu mnogopartiiny parlament?” http://slon.ru/world/vybory_v_kazakhstan-731008.xhtml.

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⁴ “Dosym Satpayev: Kazakhstan khotyat prevratit v tylovuyu bazu dzhikhada,” *Svobodnaya pressa*, Feb. 11, 2011, <http://svpressa.ru/politic/article/38858>.

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⁶ R. Falyakhov, “Nam ne nado nichevo risovat i priukrashivat: Masimov rasskazal *Gazete.Ru* o rassledovanii v Zhanaozene,” www.gazeta.ru/business/2012/01/23/3971289.shtml.

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⁸ A. Loginov, “Chyi ushi torchat za sobyiyami v Zhanaozene?” <http://www.contur.kz/node/1870>.

⁹ “Vybory v Kazakhstane ne sootvetstvuyut fundamentalnym demokraticeskim standartam — OSCE Parliamentary Assembly,” <http://www.newskaz.ru/politics/20120116/2512816.html>.

¹⁰ N. Kuzmin, “My izmenilis,” *Expert Kazakhstana*, Jan. 23, 2012.

¹¹ N. Mustafayev, “Vybory-2012: etnichesky faktor,” <http://www.nomad.su/?a=3-201201130043>.

¹² Accusations of corruption against Nursultan Nazarbayev.

¹³ <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1488620.html>.

¹⁴ “Vtoraya volna,” *Kommersant*.

¹⁵ M. Olcott, Commentary: “Kazakhstan’s Political (r)evolution,” Carnegie Endowment for Intern. Peace, Washington, Jan. 27, 2012.

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