

Kazakhstan's Shifting Sands: President Nazarbayev's Legacy & What Follows



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In retrospect, the 19 March 2019 resignation of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev should not have come as a surprise. In June 2018 then speaker of the Senate and now President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, announced that there was strong likelihood that Nazarbayev would not run for President in 2020 when the next election is mandated to occur. It is unlikely that he would have spoken without the approval of Nazarbayev himself.

A further hint, also in retrospect, occurred in February 2019 when Nazarbayev fired his entire government, citing their lack of success in managing an increasingly stagnant economy. For a politician who came of age during Brezhnev's *zastoj*, the Era of Stagnation, he did not want his legacy to be linked to such a time, as is Brezhnev's

today. It was therefore fitting for Nazarbayev's legacy that he took none of the blame himself, indicating that he had instructed his government to fix the problems, but that they had failed. Replacing the government with a new team, including a new Prime Minister Askar Mamin, could not fix the problems in the short term of course. Eventually, Nazarbayev realized, the Kazakh people would turn on him.

In some ways, they already had.

Protests that had been rare were occurring with increased frequency, a concern for a President who came to power largely on the back of the first anti-Soviet protest of the Gorbachev era, 'Jeltoqsan' (Желтоқсан көтерілісі), in December 1986. The Jeltoqsan protest, in which an estimated 200 people were killed, had become synonymous with independence after the fact, and it was likely no mistake that Nazarbayev declared Kazakhstan's independence on its anniversary, 16 December 1991, just days before the USSR imploded, leaving Nazarbayev as its first – and until 20 March 2019 – only President.

The December 2011 strike in Zhanaozen, where 14 people were killed by Kazakh authorities, brought to light many of the economic problems that had been simmering for years outside the major cities, but it had largely been put down, with few rumblings from there until the last year. However, it was most certainly those protests in Astana in February of this year that had a final determining factor on Nazarbayev's leaving now: a fire killed five young children in a ramshackle house lacking in modern amenities. The children had been left alone by parents unable to afford childcare, as they worked multiple jobs just to feed them. A number of mothers took to the streets to protest the lack of support for large families, and Nazarbayev blinked, promising more financial support. However, this was just a sign of what was to come, as growing economic inequality would have led to further protests.

In some ways this is a Machiavellian move on Nazarbayev's part: it allows him to be removed from the problems of the day. He would not be held directly responsible if the economy continues to stagnate and therefore he would not be held directly responsible if standards-of-living continue to fall. He would not be held directly responsible if there is another fire, or if there is another violent outburst in Zhanaozen. And if there are

protests against the government, they would not be directly against him. All these problems will fall on the shoulders of Nazarbayev's successor, who could, in turn, resign, turning the office of the President over to Nazarbayev's daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva. As newly-appointed Speaker of the Senate, she is now next in the line of succession. However, it is unlikely that Nazarbayev wants this to happen, at least not in the short term, for that, too, might tarnish his legacy. The country has largely tolerated Nazarbayev's extended terms because of the stability he brought to Kazakhstan, but it might not take too kindly to another Nazarbayev following so quickly into the Presidency, much less a woman in a highly-patriarchal society. For both reasons, large scale unrest that Nazarbayev tried his hardest to avoid, could explode throughout Kazakhstan.

What else prompted Nazarbayev's resignation was that he was the last of the Soviet-era leaders still in power. Saparmurat Niyazov, best known as Turkmenbashi, in Turkmenistan and Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan both died in office, having run their countries into the ground. In Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev is working to undo the Karimov legacy as quickly as he can. Askar Akaev in Kyrgyzstan was run out of office during the Tulip Revolution, months before his term of office was due to expire. With the exception of two later office holders in Kyrgyzstan, who left when their terms ended, no Central Asian leader gave up power willingly. Emomali Rahmon, who took over at the end of the Tajik Civil War, is reportedly looking for a way to step aside, but it remains far from certain how this will happen or who will take over. Nazarbayev did not want to die in office, having failed to set up a succession; he also did not want to be chased from office in a revolution, allowing his successor to destroy his legacy.

Nearly all of modern Kazakhstan is Nazarbayev's doing. He took a backwards, largely agricultural Soviet Republic, best known for hosting gulags, nuclear and chemical testing sites, and the Baikonur space agency and turned it into a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation, where ethnic tensions are largely unseen in public, with a modern economy and a growing middle class. He is also given much credit for ceding Kazakhstan's nuclear weapons, inherited from the USSR, under the Nunn-Lugar accords. Nazarbayev created a country where none had existed before. In his farewell remarks to the nation, Nazarbayev said, shooting a rhetorical bullet at Putin that, yes,

Kazakhstan today is a modern country, the 9th largest in the world, which has carved itself out a leading place at the heart of Eurasia.

Nazarbayev's own brand of 'Eurasianism' is responsible for much of this success.

Initially he tried to serve as a bridge between Russia and the rest of the region – a role that Kazakhstan played for much of its Soviet existence, but, seeing how Russia's own brand of Eurasianism under Putin was increasingly a form of neo-imperialism, he began to gravitate away from Russia and toward Central Asia. Together with Uzbekistan, they have solidified a uniquely Central Asian space in the heart of Eurasia, which, if handled properly can balance between Russia, China, and an increasingly active India, leaving none able to dominate, as much as two of the three wish. Fears of Kremlin pressure in the post-Nazarbayev years, for example, is thought to be the driving force behind the last-minute demotion of Prosecutor-General Kairat Kozhamzharov to Senator, replaced by Gizat Nurdauletov, a close ally of Nazarbayev's nephew, Samat Abish.

Nazarbayev is not leaving entirely, however. He retains the title "The Leader of the Nation," will remain leader of his political party, and will also chair the Security Council, which, in very real terms, gives him substantial ruling powers. Namely, he maintain direct authority over the armed forces, and he has the ability to intervene directly in the policymaking structure of the nation as long as he wishes. This gives him both the ability to rule and plausible deniability should anything go wrong. When it goes badly, he is not President any longer; when it goes right, it is due to his wisdom watching from an earthly above.

This analogy is particularly apt as the hagiography of Nazarbayev is already well underway. It took only 24 hours for the capital of Astana to be named Nursultan, and there is already a Nazarbayev Street in Shymkent, with more likely to follow. His handprint appears in the Bayterek Tower, which looks down on the city now named for him, and with him stepping down willingly, it is unlikely that any successor will be able to change any of this back. Unlike Stalin and Turkmenbashi, who through threats and fiats created cults of personality around themselves, only to see them stripped away after their deaths, Nazarbayev has feigned humility, requesting that nothing be named after him while he was in power. Only the eponymously-named Nazarbayev University

bore his name, and that, at least, was an institution of higher learning, hardly the same type of vanity project, particularly given its close connections to well-established Western and Western-style universities. In a country that stomped on democratic movements, it largely upheld the standards of academic freedom, more so at times than some private universities in the United States.

What follows is largely predictable: President Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev will follow much the same path as did Nazarbayev, with the full responsibility of power now on his shoulders. He is very much a Nazarbayev man, although he is more worldly-wise and better educated. He graduated from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations; he served in the Soviet Foreign Ministry, with terms abroad in Singapore and China, and, after independence, he served twice as Foreign Minister, once as Prime Minister, and twice as Chair of the Senate. He also was a Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations for two years and speaks Kazakh, Russian, English, Chinese, and possibly French. In a different reality, Tokayev could have the potential to be a different kind of President for Kazakhstan.

However, Tokayev's success is ultimately tied to Nazarbayev's feelings about his rule, so he will have to tread carefully. Success, according to Nazarbayev's definition, likely means a Presidential term of his own to follow the interim period; failure likely means a new President in 2020, possibly Prime Minister Askar Mamin, if Nazarbayev wishes to turn toward a younger generation and avoid the familial line of succession. Open, free, full, and fair elections seem unlikely, despite Nazarbayev's claim of having created a democracy. Indeed, Kazakhstan has already seen its first arrests of protesters by the new regime, many of whom are unhappy with the renaming of the Kazakh capital Astana to Nursultan; those carrying light blue balloons are particularly targeted, and fears of an impending "Balloon Revolution" might temper any desires to change leadership again or change course at all so quickly. Therefore, the policies that Nazarbayev put into place and has followed in recent years are unlikely to change under Tokayev, barring outside pressure, either economic from China or military from Russia, and then all bets are off.

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