

Central Asian Leaders Suffocating Democracy

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Leaders in Central Asia are turning their countries into authoritarian states.

Democracy is in danger of suffocating across Central Asia as the region's heads of state tighten their grip on power.

Leaders of all the countries in the area are seeking to extend their presidential mandates and consolidate their political cabals.

The President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbaev, said in a recent speech to the country's law enforcement agencies, "We must show the population that we are strong, that there is power and that it is working."

On the face of it, the remark had merit in the context of bringing order to the country.

When, however, one considers the president's supplementary remarks, which called for tight control of political opposition and the media, the implications for democracy in Kazakhstan are more serious.

Not one Central Asian head of state has been replaced in the ten years since the collapse of the USSR. Almost all the region's leaders are heading down the same well-beaten path, seeking through referendums to extend their presidential mandates. The president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurad Niyazov, has secured tenure for life, setting a dangerous precedent for neighbouring Central Asian heads of state to follow.

But it is not only the political ambitions of incumbent heads of state that are pushing Central Asia towards authoritarianism. Other factors are at play too.

Perhaps one of the most important factors has been the family-clan structure of power that predominates in the region. In essence, political decisions here are taken by people interconnected by family ties or who are personally bound to the head of state.

In October last year, for example, the VIProblem group published a list rating Kazakhstan's top five politicians by level of influence. Experts rated Nazarbaev the most influential with 77.1 per cent. In second place, with 28.6 per cent was his son-in-law Rakhat Aliev, head of the Almaty and Almaty Oblast Committee for National Security. Nazarbaev's eldest daughter and Aliev's wife, who runs the largest state TV channel in the republic, Khabar, came third. Timur Kulibaev, another of Nazarbaev's sons-in-law, came fourth with 25.7 per cent. He runs the state company Kaztransoil, which deals in oil and gas. Kazakhstan's prime minister Kasymjomart Tokaev came last with a 20 per cent rating.

Opposition politics across Central Asia is generally weak, comprised as it is of people who have offended the powers-that-be. Felix Kulov in Kyrgyzstan and Akejan Kajegeldin in Kazakhstan, for example, both used to occupy influential posts in government, but are now out of favour and leaders of opposition political parties.

Increasing tension, particularly political and religious extremism, has also contributed to the rise of authoritarianism in the region. The events in Batken in southern Kyrgyzstan demonstrated that a weak power-base is incapable of dealing with such developments.

Regional friction between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which has already led to some border skirmishes, has also had a part to play.

Western policy also appears to have switched emphasis in the light of these developments, with support for democracy coming a poor second to the bolstering of stability in the region.

The recent visit by the United States Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in April this year made US priorities abundantly clear. During the course of her visit, Albright paid considerable attention to issues of border conflict and gave the Kazakh government assurances that the USA would provide assistance in guaranteeing the security of the country. Assurances she also made to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

The emergence of the region's power-hungry presidents has its roots in the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The emergence of independent republics in Central Asia ushered in a new era of political development and new ideologies. The preferred path of development in Central Asia favoured democracy, but only after an obligatory (though this is open to debate) intermediary stage of authoritarian government. The main explanation presented for this path has always been the perceived need to pass through a buffer stage between Soviet totalitarianism and democracy.

The nomenclature elite in all the post-Soviet states welcomed this direction, guaranteeing as it did the preservation of their status. Only those elements of the "new bourgeoisie" excluded from power and the rich financial pickings this brought called for active change.

The move away from Soviet totalitarianism was accompanied by a strengthening of the role of the legislature in Central Asian region with the exception of Turkmenistan. In more recent times, however, this has led to a confrontation between the legislative and executive branches of power.

This confrontation reached its peak in the mid-1990s. For example, in 1993 and 1995 the Supreme Soviet of Kazakhstan was dissolved and declared illegitimate and in 1994 Kyrgyzstan suffered a parliamentary crisis. As a result, the executive branches of power, principally the heads of state, began to concentrate power in their own hands.

The Soviet era's strong emphasis on executive powers inevitably influenced political development across post-Soviet Central Asia. The presidents of these countries, having come to embody the ideology of independence, took on the functions previously held by the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

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