

Kazak Leadership Fears Upheaval

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Closure of opposition party and move against major civil society group suggest Kazak leadership is keen to shore up power following events in Ukraine.

Fear of political upheaval like that seen recently in Ukraine lies behind recent moves by the Kazak leadership to consolidate its grip on power, analysts say.

Ukraine's so-called "Orange Revolution", which saw opposition candidate Victor Yuschenko unexpectedly beat incumbent regime favourite Victor Yanukovich to the presidency following massive displays of public support, has been followed by a fresh round of efforts to quell opposition in Kazakstan.

An Almaty court on January 6 ordered the closure of the Democratic Choice of Kazakstan, DCK, one of the leading opposition parties, on grounds of "political extremism".

Another case currently working its way through the Kazak court system sees the local branch of the Soros Foundation, a US-based civil society group, being prosecuted for alleged tax evasion.

While there are significant differences between Ukraine and Kazakstan, where President Nursultan Nazarbaev has retained a much firmer grip on power since the break up of the Soviet Union in 1991, analysts say these latest developments are a clear sign that the leadership is keen to keep things that way in the run-up to presidential elections in 2006.

The decision to shut down the DCK came in response to a statement made by members at the party's second congress on December 11, calling the current regime in Kazakstan illegitimate and accusing it of working against the interests of its citizens. The speakers recommended that the public be more assertive and protest against this state of affairs.

Senior Almaty prosecutor Almas Ramazanov claimed the statement "stirs up social dissension". "By calling for acts of civil disobedience, the DCK creates a threat to the national security of Kazakstan...", he said in court on January 6. "These actions constitute political extremism."

The official reason for the case against Soros-Kazakstan was that it failed to pay social security taxes worth 600,000 US dollars to the Kazak government between January 2002 and March 2004.

In a press release issued on December 29, the organisation argued that it hadn't paid the sum in question because former members of the government had said it was on a list of international groups who are exempt from paying them. The Kazak tax bodies reply that the agreement in question in fact applies only to American commercial companies.

The case is going ahead even though Soros-Kazakstan said in the same press release that it had paid the tax deficit in full as soon as the dispute arose in October 2004.

Ruslan Klemisov, spokesperson for the Kazak tax police, though refusing to speak in detail about the case, insisted it is purely a matter of legal procedure, "They paid [the taxes], but they paid after the inspection. The fact is that they avoided payment," he said.

“If any organisation were in their place, we would open a criminal case against them too.”

But analysts suspect the moves against the DCK and Soros-Kazakhstan are in fact very much tied in with recent events in Eastern Europe.

They say the current moves in Kazakhstan appear to echo events in Uzbekistan following Georgia’s late-1993 “Rose Revolution”, when the Uzbek branch of the Soros Foundation failed to get its registration renewed on technical grounds. Uzbekistan at the time, like Kazakhstan now, was due to hold elections in the near future.

Lawyer Evgeny Zhovtis, director of the Kazakh International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law, says the trial that resulted in the DCK’s closure included a series of irregularities and was clearly political.

“The political motivation of this trial and its prescribed nature were clear from the very beginning,” he told journalists at a January 7 press conference. “The task prescribed from the beginning was to liquidate the DCK.

“It is also clear that the determining catalyst for this trial were the events in Ukraine. The suit by the prosecutor’s office was not brought immediately after the DCK congress, where the DCK’s political statement was passed, and not [even] two to three days after the statement was published in the media. [In fact, the suit was only brought] on the day after it became clear that as a result of the ‘Orange Revolution’... the leader of the opposition had come to power in Ukraine.”

Political analyst Sanat Kushkumbaev agreed that there is a link. It is natural to assume, he said, that “any radical approach – and Ukraine is a clear example of a radical approach to power by the opposition – [will worry] the Kazakhstan authorities”.

He said DCK members had further worried the Kazakh authorities by their participation in an opposition group that travelled to Ukraine to observe events there. Opposition newspapers in Kazakhstan published photographs of members of the party shaking hands with their counterparts in Ukraine, and the DCK has since been particularly vocal in its support for Yushchenko.

Oleg Katsiev, a member of Soros-Kazakhstan’s board of trustees, though keen not to exacerbate the situation, told IWPR that he also has suspicions about the factors motivating the charges against the organisation.

“We could try to say something about this now,” he told IWPR. “But I would prefer to receive a clear answer from the authorities. At the moment we are undoubtedly worried... there is reason to believe that there are political reasons behind the criminal case.”

Kazakhstan’s strong-arm leaders have every reason to be wary of the pro-democracy Soros Foundation.

Whilst the organisation doesn’t openly finance political opposition in Kazakhstan, explained Kushkumbaev, “it financed institutions that were the most independent of the authorities. The foundation has various programmes, including a programme of local self-administration and programmes of political reform – and they are all directed towards developing institutions of civil society.”

Given Nazarbaev's firm grip on power in Kazakhstan, observers say the government may in fact have overreacted to developments in Eastern Europe.

"It is unlikely that the events which may have taken place in Ukraine and Georgia will be applicable to Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is not Georgia or Ukraine, there has always been stability here," political analyst Maksut Sarsenov told IWPR.

Katsiev also warned that the government stands to lose out by such moves, which will no doubt go down badly with the international community. "Undoubtedly, any repression and acts against organisations that work to help democratic reforms will affect Kazakhstan's image," he said. "I think there are also sensible people in power at the moment, and they should understand all of this."

At the same time, Sarsenov warned that if Soros-Kazakhstan does close – as its December 29 press release said might have to happen if pressure doesn't ease – this could have serious implications for other civil society groups operating in the country.

"The non-governmental sector has in many ways become stronger, found a firm foothold and become a noticeable factor that plays a certain important role in society... closing this foundation will do serious damage to it," he told IWPR.

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