

Kazakhstan: President's Daughter Makes Play for Power

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Dariga Nazarbaeva may be paving the way to succeeding her father after announcing plans to set up a party.

Dariga Nazarbaeva, the elder daughter of Kazak president Nursultan Nazarbaev, has made the clearest indication yet that she is moving into big-time politics.

Nazarbaeva recently announced that she plans to turn her Asar movement - which was set up to aid young people and the socially disadvantaged - into a bona fide political party.

"The age of big reforms is over and it is time now for smaller acts, real actions with concrete results. That is the idea behind the initiative to create a new party," Nazarbaeva said in a statement on September 21 published on the Website of her Khabar media agency.

The decision to transform the movement into a political party came after a month-long countrywide campaign in which the president's daughter appealed to young people to join the movement.

Central Asian observers see this as the first step on a path that could lead Nazarbaeva to the 2004 parliamentary elections - and maybe to the presidency itself.

Almaty political analyst Dosym Satpaev told IWPR that Nazarbaeva's ambition has been visible for some time. "She wants to be a politician, and she needed to create a platform to pursue these goals and stand in the parliamentary elections - and possibly the 2006 presidential race."

Kazak journalist Aigul Omarova believes that the president's daughter is laying the foundations to succeed her father one day. "It's possible that if she is successful in the elections, she could even take the speaker's position in the Senate - the state's second-in-command under the constitution, and would then have the right to replace the president in the event of his early resignation," he said.

Commenting on Nazarbaeva's latest move, Moscow based journalist Sanobar Shermatova pointed out that that political developments in Central Asia have their own dynamics.

"The formula by which power is distributed in Central Asia is reminiscent of the dynastic transition which dominated this region in the Middle Ages," she said.

Opposition Azamat party leader Pyotr Svoik agrees, "The political party is a platform for elections in which the daughter will succeed the father. But it is a cover for carrying through a not very democratic idea."

Omarova likened this theory to the current situation in Azerbaijan, where president Heidar Aliev's son Ilham was recently appointed prime minister and thus pushed to the front of the line to succeed his ailing father.

While the 63-year-old Kazak president does not have any known health problems, there is still a possibility

that he may not be able to carry on as president indefinitely. His current term expires in 2006.

Arkady Dubnov, a Moscow-based journalist specialising in Central Asia, said that the ongoing investigation in the United States into alleged payments by some Western oil companies made to high ranking Kazak officials has made the regime nervous.

"Kazakgate, as the corruption scandal has become known, is in full swing and President Nazarbaev is keeping a very close eye on what is going on there," he said.

The scandal shows no sign of dying down, and the regime faces a fresh challenge after former Mobil executive Bryan Williams was jailed for tax evasion last week. As part of a plea bargain, it is believed that Williams provided investigators with a "road map" to the Kazak officials he dealt with during his time negotiating oil deals with the former Soviet republic. The trail of high-profile figures allegedly leads to the very top.

This continuing uncertainty could pave the way for the president's daughter to step into her father's shoes sooner than expected.

Nazarbaeva has always used her privileged position to the full. She became director of the Khabar news agency in 1994, soon turned it into a media empire and a leading mouthpiece of official ideology. Four years later, Khabar was partially privatised, but observers believe it is controlled by Nazarbaeva.

The firm's rapid expansion was accompanied by the emergence of a powerful business group led by Nazarbaeva's influential and controversial husband Rakhat Aliev, who at that time was at the height of his political career.

In late 2001, President Nazarbaev sidelined Aliev, dispatching him to Vienna as ambassador to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. After this, Nazarbaeva stepped out of her husband's shadow to become a powerful public figure in her own right.

However, her efforts to establish herself as a pro-democracy figure and champion of press freedom have been largely greeted with suspicion and derision from the independent media, opposition activists and non-governmental organisations.

Her international Eurasian Media Forum, held in 2002 and 2003, was hailed by the pro-government media as proof that Kazakhstan is developing a free press and a stable, multi-party political system. Nazarbaeva also backed the creation of a Congress of Journalists to unite Kazak media personnel. But critics dismissed these as little more than government-sponsored public relations exercises which failed to address any real problems.

In Dubnov's view, Nazarbaeva is trying to portray herself as a politician of moderate views. "She has tried for some time to demonstrate that she has her own, more balanced, opinion," he said.

He believes that she is trying to have the best of both worlds - using her connections and influence with the ruling regime, while trying to appeal to her father's critics by showing a somewhat softer persona which is more open to compromise.

"One example of this was her call to [the authorities] not to subject former prime minister Akezhan

Kazhegeldin to the severest punishment." Kazhegeldin was sentenced in absentia to several years' imprisonment in 2001, but is still heavily involved in opposition politics in exile.

Azamat's Pyotr Svoik is suspicious of how Nazarbaeva will use the new party. "Asar will use all the administrative resources which are at the government's disposal," he said. "It will also utilise Khabar both as a media instrument and as a financial source, because the group receives substantial state subsidies."

Amanjol Smagulov is a pseudonym for a journalist in Almaty.

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