

Nazarbayev Plans His Legacy

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How will Kazakhstan's leader be remembered for his 30 years in power?

With the surprise resignation of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, senate chair Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev becomes interim leader until elections expected in 2020. Nazarbayev, the unchallenged head of Kazakhstan since 1989, retains a great deal of power – but who exactly will succeed him remains unclear.

Andrei Grozin, a Russia-based expert on Central Asia, told IWPR that while Nazarbayev can claim relative prosperity and political stability as part of his legacy, corruption and economic uncertainty also await the new leadership.

IWPR: Why did Nazarbayev resign early without waiting for the end of his presidency?

Andrei Grozin: I can only make some suggestions. First of all, [it could be] his health. He is turning 79 this year, but in the video of Nazarbayev's address he doesn't look like a man who is leaving because he is exhausted. It begs some other question.

Nazarbayev, having all the information, is aware that if he holds this office to his last gasp, he would leave just like [former Uzbekistan leader] Karimov or [ex-Turkmen president] Saparmurat Niyazov. Therefore, Nazarbayev did not postpone this process, but led it.

Moreover, Nazarbayev is not going to leave. In the same address of the president he stated very clearly that he would remain the head of the Security Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Nur Otan party. In fact, he is turning into Kazakhstan's [ex-Chinese leader] Deng Xiaoping. He would be the Deng Xiaoping who is going to take care of the election of the successor, and to control, at least in the beginning, the situation until the successor gains experience.

To what extent will this plan work? In Kyrgyzstan, for example - where a trusted successor replaced the incumbent - it failed.

We'll see if it is going to work or not. Anyway, we should pay attention to how he has presented the person who is going to be the interim president – the head of the Senate of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev. He said he trusted Tokayev, that he was a person to whom they could entrust the management of Kazakhstan.

In this sense, Tokayev is not Sooronbai Zheenbekov [the Kyrgyz president who broke away from his predecessor Almazbek Atambaev]. Zheenbekov was perceived as a person with certain resources: financial, regional, experience and so on. He was not completely dependent on Atambaev. Tokayev doesn't have such resources, at least not that I can see right now. This person has fewer objective and subjective resources to be able to govern the country on his own. His only resource is Nursultan Nazarbayev.

But Nazarbayev should also take into account that in Central Asia a person who is promoted to an executive position, no matter how weak or manageable he may seem, can quickly turn from a puppet and weak person into an absolutely independent one. There are many examples in Kyrgyzstan and in other republics. These persons over-reach not because of their good qualities or peculiarities, but due to the fact that the president in all five Central Asian states, whether he wants it or not, controls all of the main instruments of country governance.

Why has Nazarbayev performed this complex operation?

Nazarbayev has many children from different marriages, as well as both close and distant relatives. They all need to be covered and protected. Nazarbayev also keeps in mind the perspectives of his role in textbooks on the history of Kazakhstan. He wants to remain a founding father, he doesn't want to have his legacy treated like Niyazov's or Karimov's.

In this sense, Tokayev does not appear to be a person capable of such revolutionary things. He is generally a person without any distinctive traits, a person who has worked for many years in international agencies, in the diplomatic service, ie he is not disposed to such surprises [as to revise Nazarbayev's legacy]. He is quite a predictable, adequate man, and in this sense, I think we should not expect Tokayev to do with Nazarbayev as Zheenbekov has done with Atambaev. We will see, but I am not sure that Tokayev will be the next president of Kazakhstan.

Who may be the next president of Kazakhstan?

If you asked this question a week ago, I would say it would most likely be the eldest daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva. Many would say so. She has got the resources, the team, not only her name but also experience in government institutions and the parliament.

Other potential candidates are also from Nazarbayev's team. The generation of [Karim] Massimov, Akhmetzhan Yesimov, Nurlan Nigmatulin are the people who possess the most important resource in Kazakhstan: access to the president. There are ten of them. Not all of them are relatives of the president.

What structural problems does Nazarbayev leave behind?

The successor will have a lot of unresolved issues, mainly in the economic sphere. Problems in the monetary and financial markets are snowballing; unresolved issues relate to Kazakhstan's participation in the Chinese Belt and Road initiative. There are recurring problems with neighbours, as well as with Western countries that have different attitudes towards Kazakhstan's policies. Moreover, the effectiveness of Kazak officials declines every year. The latest disturbances in the government have clearly demonstrated this. Everybody has rebuked the government of [former prime minister

Bakhytzhan] Sagintayev, and every six months everyone discussed its resignation. But the government continued to work, not because it was so wonderful or because Nazarbayev liked it, but because they have few candidates in reserve.

Who has been the target of the largest number of corruption scandals in Kazakhstan recently? It's the graduates of the [foreign scholarship] Bolashak programme who began to build career in the ministries and come to power. People who have been educated in the West do not rebuild the system from within, but become the same cogs in the system of formal and informal relations, just like the previous ones. It means that the modernisation of consciousness which is so discussed much by governmental institutions, from the presidential administration to all regional programmes, has failed.

Nazarbayev is often credited with economic success and attracting investment. Would he have been able to achieve this if not for oil?

The hydrocarbon factor has certainly played a very important role in Kazakhstan's economic leadership of Central Asia. It suffices to look at the structure of exports and foreign exchange funds in the national fund and the state budget. Kazakhstan is more dependent on raw materials than Russia.

Kyrgyzstan lives in a situation where it has to make its own way and there are no oil royalties. And Kazakhstan has faced a dramatic drop in commodity prices in recent years, which has caused frustration and massive psychological discomfort among the public. All the social initiatives suggested by the country's leadership are aimed at eliminating this discomfort, demonstrating that the state cares for low-income citizens. But I don't know if the distribution of money can help solve this problem. However, if not for oil, they wouldn't have this money. It is clear that the situation would be worse.

What takes first place in the history of independent Kazakhstan: oil or Nazarbayev?

It is difficult to say, but Nazarbayev did play a historical role. Keeping in mind the figures who then really aspired to power, the history of Kazakhstan could have been different if one of them had succeeded.

Moreover, the initial legacy of Kazakhstan after the collapse of the Soviet Union was not very good. The budget was short of money, there was a huge exodus of the Russian population. Now everyone has forgotten about it, but real opposition did exist then...but Nazarbayev retained power. The country avoided such [conflicts] as in Tajikistan or in the provinces of the Russian Federation.

Nazarbayev is surely an autocrat, a person who develops the country based on his own perceptions of good and bad. On the other hand, if we compare him with the late Islam Karimov, it's highly questionable who is more autocratic and who has caused more problems to their countries in different periods. Generally speaking, Karimov ruined the country's economy, and [his successor] Shavkat Mirziyoyev is now trying to restore it. After all, Nazarbayev leaves a well-functioning economy to his successor. Of course, there are problems, a lot of issues that require major revision, restructuring, reforming. But if we compare the economic system of Kazakhstan with the economic system of Tajikistan or Turkmenistan, we will see that it is like night and day...The economy of Kazakhstan has been well reformed during the 30 years of Nazarbayev's ruling, unlike the politics.

Location: Kazakhstan

Topic: Oil

Regime

Economy

Focus: From the Borderland to the

Steppes

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