

Presidential PR in Kazakhstan

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Nursultan Nazarbaev used a live TV programme to fend off corruption charges and confirm that he plans to stay in charge.

Kazak president Nursultan Nazarbaev's unusual decision to defend his political record in a national TV phone-in suggests he is concerned to spruce up his image ahead of a parliamentary election later this year.

Nazarbaev used the live broadcast to dismiss sensitive allegations of corruption levelled against his regime, and confirmed that he would run for a further term in office in 2006 – when he will have been Kazakhstan's leader for 17 years.

Although he gave little away on the corruption issue, the broadcast indicates an apparent will to present a more responsive, open leadership style to the public rather than the aloof presidency of the past.

The most controversial subject to come up during the three-hour phone-in on May 14 was Nazarbaev's alleged contacts with businessman James Giffen, currently on trial on corruption charges in the United States in the "Kazakgate" scandal.

Giffen, who acted as an intermediary between Kazakhstan and a number of western oil giants interested in the country's mineral wealth, is accused of paying more than 78 million US dollars to two senior Kazak officials in exchange for the signing of major contracts. He denies the charges.

"Kazakgate" has been an embarrassment to Nazarbaev's administration, which has been anxious to build a positive international image, and his officials have struggled to limit the damage since investigations began in the US in 1999, and especially in light of Giffen's indictment last year and now the imminent trial.

Since the president has not addressed the allegations in public, it came as a surprise that he chose a live broadcast to talk about them, the same day as Giffen was due to appear in court. In the event, the US trial was postponed until early June.

Nazarbaev was asked about the case by the TV programme presenter. Because "Kazakgate" is strictly off-limits for journalists in Kazakhstan, all the signs were that the question was set up.

President Nazarbaev brushed away any suggestion that Giffen has acted as his presidential adviser, saying he worked for the government as an informal consultant, "He advised on signing contracts, but the rest is all insinuation, provocation and assertions by our [former] prime minister Akezhan Kazhegeldin, who is on the run."

Kazhegeldin was prime minister in 1994-97, when Giffen was working as an adviser to Kazakhstan. He left Kazakhstan after falling out with the president, and now leads an opposition group from his self-imposed exile.

Nazarbaev said that all oil contracts signed while Giffen was involved had proved beneficial for Kazakhstan, but went on to distance his administration from the US proceedings, "This trial is against Giffen, as he is an

American citizen. It is not directed against any citizen of our country. I therefore see no need to follow this process or comment on it.”

Political opponents of the president were sceptical about his motives for addressing the “Kazakgate” issue so publicly. “Nazarbaev decided to manipulate public opinion, and to some extent he achieved this,” said Communist party leader Serikbolsyn Abdilbin.

Opposition activist Amirjan Kosanov said the phone-in was an exercise designed to deflect public attention from Giffen’s alleged links with the president himself. “The head of state’s remark that Giffen was a government adviser is ironic since many newspapers have obtained a copy of James Giffen’s ID as presidential adviser – signed by the president himself,” said Kosanov.

Nazarbaev also used the live programme to stake out his political future, confirming that he would run for the presidency again in 2006 and urging voters to support a cluster of pro-presidential parties in this autumn’s parliamentary election.

“The constitution and laws allow me to stand as a candidate and I will definitely run if all goes well,” he told viewers.

Nazarbaev also appealed to Kazakhstan’s electorate to vote for the political parties loyal to him, “I would ask and urge people in Kazakhstan to ensure that the Otan party and its allies get a majority of seats in the future parliament.”

All but a handful of seats in the current parliament are held by Otan and other parties and independent deputies aligned firmly with the president. One new player in this year’s election will be the Asar party, set up and led by Dariga Nazarbaeva, the president’s daughter.

Nazarbaev has been Kazakhstan’s leader since 1989, remaining in charge when it became independent in 1991 and winning endorsement in elections in which he faced little opposition. If – as is likely – he wins again, he will remain office until at least 2013, because of constitutional amendments making each term seven instead of five years and removing the limit on how many times a president can serve.

The announcement scotched any speculation that Nazarbaev might be prepared to step down in 2006. According to Kosanov, the broadcast was Nazarbaev’s way of sending “a clear message to anyone in his circle who might have presidential ambitions”.

Political analyst Dosym Satpaev believes the announcement marks the beginning of Nazarbaev’s election campaign. “I think that this is the first step, and such events are designed to demonstrate that president is fully aware of what is happening in the country, and that he’s in control.”

The broadcast itself evoked mixed reactions from viewers and analysts.

Dametken Alenova, who runs the non-government group Yedinstvo which focuses on social issues, welcomed the more public style demonstrated in the phone-in. “There were lot of issues related to the problem of housing and human rights,” she said. “I believe that if there are more live broadcasts like this, they will get more democratic and transparent each time.”

At the same time, Alenova expressed concern at the “Soviet” style apparent in the way Nazarbaev’s

performance was managed, saying, “it would have been better if the president had answered questions asked direct by viewers rather than ‘pre-prepared’ ones.”

Satpaev was more critical, comparing Nazarbaev’s performance with similar phone-ins organised – and carefully staged – for his colleague, Russian president Vladimir Putin.

“He [Putin] regularly participates in live phone-ins and managed to project the image of a head of state who knows about problems and wants to solve them,” he said. “The president [Nazarbaev] knew in advance what questions would be asked.”

Peter Svoik, co-chairman of the opposition Democratic Choice of Kazakstan party, commented that it took Nazarbaev some time to settle down to what – for a leader accustomed to delivering set-piece speeches – is an unaccustomed format.

“As it was live, it was particularly noticeable how tense the president looked at the beginning,” said Svoik. But he added that as the programme progressed, Nazarbaev regained his composure and began to resemble his old ebullient self.

“Whatever you say, the president is a very flexible politician.”

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