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Political Succession in Central Asia: The Example of Kazakhstan

Introduction

When Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev planned to step down due to his health, his advanced age, and the rapidly changing geopolitical situation in Eurasia, he took many factors into account. However, he had hardly reckoned with protracted protests nationwide, despite the fact that his own rise to power began with protests following a failed succession plan. There were therefore numerous arrangements in place to secure his own power and personal and family security that Nazarbayev had already made some time ago. The events in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan are proof of the risks associated with a change of president in the region. Despite the numerous measures taken to secure his power and that of his family, Nazarbayev's clan will have to expect a long-term loss of power. In the shadow of the ruling elites' power politics, Islamist ideas are spreading among the young, some of whom have no prospects. At the same time, all of Central Asia is becoming the centre of a new geopolitical Great Game between China, Russia, and the West.

The Problem of Succession

Lies the greatest danger for leaders in Central Asia after leaving active politics not directly in the loss of power as such, but in the associated danger to their own financial and physical integrity, and that of their families. The European observer should therefore not be surprised if, in order to secure their power, wealth, and lives, they rely above all on family ties and clans. In a political environment in which friendships are a highly unreliable guarantor of loyalty, as former Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev recently experienced, the bond of blood, of the family, is still regarded as the most reliable. In such a political environment, therefore, leaders must put in place numerous safeguards before resigning in order to prevent a power vacuum. The events in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan serve to confirm this: One year after a regulated transfer of power, friction between former political cronies incumbent President Sooronbay Jeenbekov and former President Almazbek Atambayev led to violent unrest and the latter's arrest.

In addition to the danger of leaving a power vacuum behind after the head of state resigns, there is also the not inconsiderable risk of a revolt from below in Central Asia, due to accumulated anger amongst the populous. Furthermore,

in a region that is already known as the Eurasian Balkans¹ due to its heterogeneous population, there is always the risk of ethnic conflict in times of crisis.

In particular, Kazakhstan's neighbour Kyrgyzstan is repeatedly shaken by revolts: In its short history, the country can look back on only two peaceful changes of state. Downfall due to a revolt is a risk that might have been all too familiar to Nazarbayev. A historical review helps in understanding these circumstances.

Nazarbayev's Rise

Nazarbayev's own rise began in 1986 as a result of the Jeltoqsan riots, bloody ethnic unrest in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). Mikhail Gorbachev had then appointed Gennady Kolbin, an ethnic Russian, to the head of the Republic in order to oust the Kazakh Dinmukhamed Kunayev. As Leonid Brezhnev's favourite, he had ruled in Alma-Ata (now Almaty) with mismanagement and nepotism, but was extremely popular with the Kazakh population. The appointment of an ethnic Russian to the head of the Republic inflamed the anger of young, nationalistic Kazakhs, as Gorbachev had broken an unwritten law, according to which the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the national Soviet Socialist Republic had to come from the titular nation. The subsequent Jeltoqsan riots claimed several hundred lives. After Kolbin had to be dismissed from the top of the Kazakh Communist Party, Gorbachev appointed Nazarbayev as First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Kazakh SSR. The explosive detail here is that the accusations of corruption against former First Secretary Kunayev only became public after Nazarbayev, a protégé of his, filed a complaint. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Nazarbayev, a representative of the old guard, remained at the very top of the government – as was the case in most of the Central Asian states. But while the presidents of the neighbouring states either died – like Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov and Turkmenistan's Saparmurat Niyazov – or lost their power and were overthrown by public unrest and civil war – like Kyrgyzstan's Askar Akayev and Tajikistan's Rahmon Nabiyev – Nursultan Nazarbayev survived and/or outlasted them all. It was not only in Central Asia, but also in the European former Soviet republics that the first heads of state had long since been voted out of office, and the same applied to the South Caucasus: Zviad Gamsakhurdia was overthrown in 1992, Ayaz Mutalibov was voted out in 1992, Levon Ter-Petrosyan stepped down in 1998.

When in recent years Nazarbayev began to think about stepping down from the leadership of the state, he was the last of the former Soviet leaders.

1 In his work "The Only World Power", Zbigniew Brzezinski, a US presidential advisor and geopolitical theorist, describes Central Asia as the Eurasian Balkans because of its mixture of peoples and the demarcation across settlement areas.

His only way to influence developments after him was through a voluntary transfer of power, though he must have been aware of the risks involved.

Excursus: Kyrgyzstan. The Unsuccessful Succession

In Kyrgyzstan, it recently became apparent what effects a failed succession plan and an associated power struggle could have on the Central Asian states that still remain less consolidated nationally. In accordance with the constitution, Social Democrat Atambayev, who was in power until 2017, did not run for election as president again. Many observers agree that it would have been in his power to change the constitution in his favour. Prime Minister at the time Sooronbay Jeenbekov, his friend, confidant, and fellow member of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan, stood in his place as a candidate. Jeenbekov won the election. In the last two years, however, he has broken with his predecessor. Atambayev, who has since been elected chairman of the Social Democratic Party, became a competitor. In the summer of 2019, Jeenbekov struck the blow. He arranged for Atambayev's immunity to be lifted and security forces stormed the ex-president's estate, which was fiercely defended by his supporters. After the first attempt failed and cost the life of a member of the security forces, Atambayev took responsibility for the deadly shot and was arrested the following day.

Atambayev's arrest not only shattered the political landscape of Central Asia – he was regarded as pro-Russian and President Vladimir Putin's confidant – but was probably a signal to all the autocrats in the region to hold on to power for as long as possible. The democratic system of Kyrgyzstan also suffered a severe blow. Not only was the continuum of peaceful transfers of power interrupted, but the internal Kyrgyz north-south conflict is now also erupting again. Atambayev, who has since been arrested, was credited with tempering this conflict in the past. Coming from Northern Kyrgyzstan himself, Atambayev had chosen in Jeenbekov a Southerner to succeed him. In addition to regional differences, Islamist ideas are spreading on a worrying scale, with the focus on the Fergana Valley. Today, there are already more mosques than schools in the country. This is disastrous in view of the fact that the majority of these mosques are financed and built by Saudi Arabia, which goes hand in hand with the spread of an Islam of Wahabi orientation.² This trend towards the creeping Islamization of Kyrgyzstan becomes even more significant in light of the fact that Jeenbekov's brother does business with Qatar, a state known as the patron and donor of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. The signal effect of Atambayev's arrest is likely to have disastrous consequences, as it encourages the ruling autocrats to hold on to power and makes any form of democratic change of government appear dangerous. The failed succession of

2 Wahhabism is a puristic-fundamentalist direction of Sunni Islam with many transitions to Jihadism and political Islamism.

Atambayev, actually an inner-Kyrgyz affair, is therefore likely to have been closely observed in neighbouring Kazakhstan – even though Nasabayev’s succession so far seems to have been successful.

Nazarbayev’s Precautions

As illustrated above, a multitude of precautions are required to ensure a safe withdrawal from the top of the state while retaining power. There is a need to prevent, for example, a power struggle between the influential families from breaking out, a revolt from the street that overthrows the system, or the designated successor turning against the former leader.

In the Kazakh presidential palace, plans for an exit must have begun some time ago. The initial measures to maintain power included de facto self-awarding of the titles “First President of Kazakhstan” and “Leader of the Nation” (*Elbasy*) in 2010, which guarantee lifelong criminal immunity. Nazarbayev curtailed the future president’s power in 2016 by strengthening the parliament and government in relation to the presidency. More relevant, however, is that Nazarbayev will remain chairman of the National Security Council even after his resignation, meaning that he controls the secret service, which is run by a close confidant. It is precisely his control of the secret service that allows Nazarbayev to retain the real power in the state. For this purpose, the position of the chairman of the Security Council was significantly strengthened in advance when it was transformed from a mere advisory body to the central constitutional one, the cornerstone for which was laid in 2018.

In order to secure the future support of a broad political base, Nazarbayev remains chairman of the ruling party Nur Otan (“Light of the Fatherland”). The family’s retention of power is safeguarded by the daughter Dariga Nazarbayeva, who has been appointed chair of the Senate. This is relevant since the chair of the Senate takes office in the event of the president’s resignation or death, as in the current case of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the then Senate chair who automatically assumed the function of interim president by constitution after Nazarbayev’s resignation. In the economic sphere, too, the Nazarbayev family’s power is safeguarded by the influential position of son-in-law Timur Kulibayev as chairman of the Kazenergy Association. Nazarbayev’s last major act before his resignation was to dismiss the government in February, giving the government’s failure to fulfil its task of increasing the population’s prosperity and standard of living as his official reason. There were no real personnel changes, however, in the form of depositions, but rather an exchange of positions, the aim of which was probably to move the members of the government into new working environments with which they first had to familiarize themselves. This measure may have deprived potential candidates for power

of their room for manoeuvre. Any planned attempts at a coup were thus prevented by a pre-emptive strike. The dismissal of the government was President Nazarbayev's last move.

The Successor

Who is the man Nazarbayev chose as his successor? Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, until then chairman of the Senate, is commonly regarded as a popular politician. He is described as an intelligent and balancing personality with many years of experience in diplomacy and government. In the past, he has served as foreign minister, prime minister, and Director-General of the UN Office at Geneva. He is regarded as a politically moderate professional politician who is not expected to bring about major changes. Like Nazarbayev, Tokayev also comes from the Soviet old guard of the former Communist Party. In the 1990s, Tokayev began earning money in the oil and gas industry, building a business empire with members of his family. His son, Timur Tokayev, owns half of the shares in Abi Petroleum Capital LLP. The other half of the company is owned by Mukhamed Izbastin, Timur Tokayev's cousin. Mukhamed Izbastin and Temirtai Izbastin, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's brother-in-law, are in the Kazakh diplomatic service, and they worked together in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Like Nazarbayev and Kunayev, the family to which Tokayev belongs also comes from the Great Horde (*Ulı jüz*), whose ancestral homeland is southern Kazakhstan, around the old capital Almaty. In Kazakhstan, the tribal affiliation to one of the three hordes still plays an important role today. Tokayev, however, has no political base of his own, because too often he has spent time abroad as a diplomat, which is why many observers regard him as a transitional president. In this role, he has a balancing function between the competing groups of Kazakh elites. Despite all the above attributes to recommend Tokayev as a successor, the absolute loyalty to Nazarbayev he has demonstrated so far may have been the most decisive factor in his election.

The Resignation, the Election Campaign, and the Election

Nursultan Nazarbayev announced his resignation from office as president of the Republic of Kazakhstan at 7 p.m. on 19 March 2019, ending his rule over Kazakhstan, which had lasted for more than three decades. Nazarbayev had ruled the country uninterrupted for 33 years since 1986, initially as First Secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party and later, since independence, as president. The aim of this step was probably to bring about a decision in his chosen moment of economic and political stability. A regular election would have entailed a certain risk that, at the same time, economic or political upheavals could trigger social unrest. In addition to Nazarbayev's age and poor health,

the danger of future geopolitical upheavals in the region may also have played a role. Islam Karimov, the first president of independent Uzbekistan, who died in 2017, had not enthroned a successor. Nazarbayev did not want to repeat something that he regarded as a mistake.

The transfer of power in Kazakhstan was carried out rather swiftly: Tokayev was sworn in as president on 20 March 2019, one day after Nazarbayev's resignation was announced. In April, Tokayev, in his capacity as interim president, announced early elections to legitimize his presidency. The election date was set for 9 June. The short deadline gave potential opponents little time to make themselves known to the masses. At the suggestion of Nazarbayev in his capacity as chairman of Nur Otan, Tokayev himself was unanimously nominated as the party's candidate in an open vote. After one potential candidate, Zhumatai Aliyev, failed the obligatory language test in Kazakh, and Talgat Yergaliyev withdrew his candidacy, Tokayev faced six competitors in the election campaign.

Presidential Election Candidates in Kazakhstan 2019

- Kassym-Jomart Tokayev – Nur Otan (ruling party; conservative, centrist, secularist)
- Amangeldy Taspikhov – Federation of Trade Unions of Kazakhstan
- Amirjan Kosanov – “Ult Tagdyry” (national-patriotic movement)
- Daniya Espayeva – Democratic Party of Kazakhstan “Ak Zhol” (liberal)
- Jambyl Akhmetbekov – Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan (social democrat)
- Sadybek Tugel – “Uly Dala Kyrandary” [Great Steppe Eagle] (republican movement)
- Toletai Rakhimbekov – People's Democratic-Patriotic Party “Auyl” (social democrat)

Unsurprisingly, Tokayev won the election with 71 per cent. His election programme represented a complete takeover of Nazarbayev's programme and did not reveal any new points of view. The second best result, with about 16 per cent, was achieved by the long-serving Amirjan Kosanov. In the past, Kosanov had joined various parties, before the election he was unexpectedly nominated by the national-patriotic movement Ult Tagdyry. During the election campaign, as Tokayev's main competitor, Kosanov advocated increased co-operation with the EU, environmental improvements, and the transformation of the political system into a parliamentary-presidential one, and argued against the construction of a nuclear power plant. As a member of one family of the Small Horde (*Kishi júz*), he achieved the best results in their ancestral homelands in the oil-rich but marginalized and impoverished West of Kazakhstan, in some

cases up to 30 per cent. Some observers assume that Kosanov's candidacy provided Tokayev with a sham opponent to make the election appear democratic.

Daniya Espayeva of the Democratic Party of Kazakhstan "Ak Zhol" achieved the third best result with about five per cent. Ak Zhol is the second largest party of the country and is regarded as a cluster of entrepreneurs. Observers classify the party as opposed to the system; in parliament it is loyal to the government.

The Protests

The election, conceived as an act of legitimation, triggered a wave of protests on an unprecedented scale, which had not been expected either at home or abroad. Even in the run-up to the election, rallies had taken place in many larger cities, calling for a boycott of the election and opposing the renaming of the capital and the construction of a nuclear power plant. It was above all Astana being renamed Nur-Sultan – a subsequent act of loyalty to Nursultan Nazarbayev initiated by Tokayev – that stirred up discontent among the population. Within a few hours, 35,000 people had signed a petition against the renaming. The state's monopoly on discourse was questioned on social media, with the discontent centring on the big cities.

The unrest was based on a foundation of increasing socio-economic problems and a crisis of legitimacy that the Nazarbayev administration had been contending with since 2014. Nazarbayev's paternalistic autocracy rested primarily on two pillars of legitimacy: Kazakh identity politics on the one hand, and constantly rising social prosperity based on the steppe state's wealth of resources on the other. The legitimacy resulting from increasing economic prosperity was weakened by the Kazakh economic crisis of 2014-2015. The crisis was triggered by two factors. The first was the fall in oil prices, which had a major impact on the economy, dependent on commodity exports. The second was the close Russian-Kazakh trade relations, with the weakening of the Russian rouble as a result of the 2014 sanctions also having a negative impact on Kazakhstan. A first wave of protests shook the country in 2016, triggered by a land reform that would have allowed Chinese investors, among others, to lease Kazakh land. Anti-Chinese resentment prevails in large sections of the population, and China's increasing economic influence is met with fear of the country being sold out. When the protests reached the metropolises of Almaty and Astana, the government reacted with repression and – at the same time – suspension of the law.

The current protests following the change of government and the election reached all major cities and mobilized thousands of demonstrators. The protest issues, which are not directly related, suggest a broader social dissatisfaction. Individual activists were arrested early on for posts on social networks or single harmless acts, but received only very short prison sentences, or none at all.

For example, an activist in West Kazakhstan, alluding to the lack of freedom of speech, held up an empty placard, whereupon he was immediately arrested and released promptly afterwards. Two other activists had unrolled a banner during a marathon with the inscription “You Cannot Run Away From The Truth #ForFreeElections #IHaveAChoice”. They were arrested and given short prison sentences but then released again soon after. The first major rallies took place on 1 May 2019 when several hundred people demonstrated in the larger cities of Nur-Sultan, Almaty, Karaganda, Aktobe, and Semipalatinsk. On 21 May, hundreds of women demonstrated in front of the headquarters of the ruling Nur Otan party. They demanded social improvements. On the day of the election itself, rallies took place in Nur-Sultan, Almaty, and Shymkent, where 500 people were arrested, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. On the following day, there were also protests against the outcome of the election. Numerous arrests also followed these protests.

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 300 police officers were injured during the rallies between 9 and 13 June 2019 as a result of the protests and riots. 4,000 people were temporarily arrested.

The Government's Reaction

The Kazakh government later reacted to the protests with a mixture of repression and an offer of participation. The classic carrot and stick policy had repeatedly been employed in the past and had already proved successful. While the demonstrations were violently dispersed, access to social media was disrupted, and there were arrests and media defamation, a new dialogue process was also opened for the people at the same time. This included the establishment of the “National Council for Social Trust” and the creation of an “Alliance of Democratic Organizations”. In an analysis carried out by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), this is referred to as an authoritarian policy of civic participation, which constitutes a form of individualized participation beyond parties, groups, associations, and movements. At the same time as creating new opportunities for participation, the government also indicated a fundamental willingness to engage in dialogue on some issues. For example, President Tokayev announced a referendum on the construction of a new nuclear power plant in response to criticism repeatedly voiced during the rallies.

28 Years of Nazarbayev. A Review

What is Nazarbayev's legacy? The fact that today, Kazakhstan is the most prosperous and stable state in Central Asia and has not been shaken by civil war,

separatism, mass exodus, or discrimination against any section of the population must be credited to Nursultan Nazarbayev and his life's work. At the beginning of its independence, the country faced several fundamental problems. In the north of the country there was a homogenous Russian-Slavic population living in a closed settlement area who wanted to join the motherland. The long border with Russia, across the steppe without natural barriers and populated on both sides by members of the Russian ethnic group, offered the perfect conditions for separatist tendencies. The Kazakh people there had become a minority in their own country. In addition, the Kazakh nation faced a question of identity. The concept of the Kazakh people as a nation had only developed through the Soviet Union's nationality policy. The division of the Kazakh-Kyrgyz people was among other things a result of this policy, as was the way the language is written and its standardization. The Kazakh people had organized themselves into nomadic tribes, the hordes, until the Russian conquest, so that a historical state tradition was also lacking. To the present day, every family can be traced back to one of the three hordes. In terms of foreign policy, in the early nineties the young state saw itself at the intersection of competing spheres of influence. The Russian Federation in the north wanted to keep the estate of the USSR within its own sphere of influence, China in the east saw an opportunity to re-establish its historical dominance over the states of Turkestan, and Turkey, with the support of the US, tried to gather the ethnically related states of Central Asia under a pan-Turkish flag. In addition to these domestic and foreign policy problems, Kazakhstan, like all other former Soviet republics, found itself confronted with independence having uncoupled them from the common economy of the USSR.

Nazarbayev approached all these issues with skill. He prevented the secession of the Russian north of the country, which most observers in the 1990s still expected, without causing a massive exodus of the Slavic population groups, as there had been in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. At the same time, he succeeded in reducing the existing tensions between the two major ethnic groups, the Russians and the Kazakhs. In parallel, a separate Kazakh identity emerged. Two factors may have been relevant here: first, the demographic development and second, the establishment of a new capital in the settlement area that was actually Russian. Under Nazarbayev's government, the Kazakh element of the population rose to become the dominant ethnic group. However, there was no significant state discrimination against the Russian population as in the Baltic states. In Latvia and Estonia, too, the titular nations threatened to become minorities in their own countries at the end of the Soviet Union. To counteract this, many members of the Russian ethnic group were not granted citizenship of the two newly formed Baltic states and fell into the category of non-citizens. Nazarbayev also refused to take senseless steps to strengthen identity, such as banning the Russian language or hastily switching to a Latin alphabet.

In terms of foreign policy, Nazarbayev managed the balancing act between Russia, China, and the West: something most of his post-Soviet counterparts have so far failed to do. Since independence, Kazakhstan has consistently pursued what is known as a multi-vector foreign policy with close ties to the Russian Federation. Abrupt changes in foreign policy, such as those Islam Karimov repeatedly carried out in Uzbekistan, or isolationism like that of “Turkmenbashi” Niyazov, were alien to Nazarbayev.

Nazarbayev’s most important legacy will probably turn out to be the expansion of the new capital Astana – today Nur-Sultan. The relocation of the capital from peripheral Almaty to centrally located Astana, in the middle of the Russian settlement area, is not only a new constitutive act, important for the identity of the young nation, but at the same time counteracts centrifugal forces. This is not only directed against separatist attempts by the Russian ethnic group, but also has an internal Kazakh component. Nazarbayev belongs to the Great Horde, whose tribal land is composed of the urban south and in which the old capital Almaty lies. Astana, on the other hand, is located in the Middle Horde (*Orta júz*) tribal area. With the expansion of Astana into the capital, a balance was created between the two large tribes and any tribalist tendencies were deprived of their basis.

What Nazarbayev failed to do despite all his efforts was to differentiate the economy. Kazakhstan remains dependent on its commodity exports. It will be up to his successor to solve this problem.

Outlook

Despite the numerous measures taken to secure his power and that of his family, Nazarbayev’s clan will have to face a long-term loss of power. Observers suspect that Tokayev is only assuming the function of a transitional president who, although he occupies a balancing position between the power factions of the Kazakh elites due to his lack of a political base, is simultaneously dependent on Nazarbayev’s favour and remaining power due to this very lack of a political base. The election win – as an act of legitimation – must therefore not obscure the fact that the question of power in Kazakhstan has not yet been decided. It is precisely the unexpectedly fierce protests before and after the elections that may have convinced any competitors within the elite that a shift in power is possible. An open power struggle can be expected above all if the political system is shaken, for example by protests or a change in the foreign policy environment. It is already evident that the country is in a highly sensitive geopolitical zone. Kazakhstan plays a central role as China’s transit corridor and commodity supplier. At the same time, to the east it borders China’s troubled province of Xinjiang (East Turkestan). Kazakhstan is likely to occupy a key position in the emerging conflict between China and the US. The recent anti-Chinese protests testify to a dangerous development for the government’s

pro-Chinese policy. Russian-Chinese relations hover above all this like a sword of Damocles, fateful for all developments in northern Eurasia.

Tokayev could be the last president of Kazakhstan to come from the old Soviet cadres. Future politicians will have grown up in an independent Kazakhstan with strongly identity-based politics, and their thinking will be correspondingly more national, both with a view to their Chinese neighbours and the Russian minority in the north.

The occurrence of such a development crucially depends on the appearance of one or a group of ambitious candidates for power from among the Kazakh elite. If this does not happen, the establishment of Tokayev – which is tantamount to maintaining the status quo – is both in the interests of the various clans and in those of the two neighbouring great powers, China and Russia.